A LITTLE WICKED

WICKED FORTUNES: BOOK ONE

AJ MERLIN

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A Little Wicked, Wicked Fortunes (Book One) by AJ Merlin

1. FIC009050 **FICTION** / Fantasy / Paranormal 2. FIC024000 **FICTION** / Occult & Supernatural

3. FIC072000 **FICTION** / LGBT / Bisexual

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7348846-3-0 eBook ISBN: 978-1-7348846-2-3

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Thank you for Reading

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PROLOGUE

My eyes squinted behind square-framed glasses, seemingly looking for something new in the three cards mounted on the boring, drab wall of the living room. I wasn't sure what I would find, or why they looked *new* to me today.

They were heirlooms, though unusable ones at this point. My mother, being the oldest of her siblings, had inherited the three tarot cards of the Major Arcana. They were the only set the Levasseur family left after four generations of no summoners, or more specifically, those witches who could call forth the magical creations existing in the Major Arcana.

Being masked with wards, I knew outsiders would only see family pictures. I, however, saw the three cards for what they really were.

The Chariot. The Moon. The Devil.

They were my family's prize possession and even though none of my family could *use them* for the magic they'd been made for, they crowed about them all the same. Not to mention I couldn't remember a time when they weren't hanging dramatically above the mantle like old family photos.

These cards of the Major Arcana were some of a few made by a powerful witch many, many centuries before. Unlike regular tarot cards, the ones *she* wove from the power of the earth and spirit were like empty shells just waiting for magic and will.

There was a story about how the Levasseur family were her only true descendants and always produced summoners when they had children, but now they only served to remind my family of what we'd lost.

"Have you touched them?" My mother's voice was soft and curious.

I adjusted my glasses but didn't look at her. "Why these?" I asked instead.

"Why these *what?*" Mom came to stand beside me, toweling off her hands. I wondered whether she'd been cooking or something more fun, like brewing potions.

"Why did your mother save these three?" I reached one hand out to gesture to the cards.

"Absolutely at random," my aunt Helene, eyes glittering with near-constant amusement, had followed my mother into the room. Both of them had the signature blonde hair of our family that seemed to show up in all of us no matter who our fathers were.

"That isn't true," my mother sighed, giving Aunt Helene a withering glare which made her younger sister grin wider. "These were our great grandmother's favorite-"

"Supposedly," Helene broke in. My mother shot her another look, prompting Aunt Helene to throw her hands up in mock surrender.

"And so Grandmother would not part with them," my mother finished.

"I'm selling them, when they're mine," I announced, and even Helene looked a little surprised.

"Why?" my aunt asked, before my mother could.

"For Avi and me. We could buy a mansion and not have to get jobs for a century."

"Two centuries," Helene amended, then shrugged at my mother's sigh of irritation. "What? If she wants to sell them when we're dead and gone, that's none of my business. But they're in demand; don't take less than they're worth, George."

"They're our family's *legacy*," my mom reprimanded, hands going to her hips.

"They're probably going to rot," I replied in my snarky tone, reaching one hand out to the frames. There was no glass, only the frame itself kept the cards against the wall. "Better to give them to someone who can use them-"

The moment my index finger connected with The Devil, heat seared my skin and I gasped, pulling back with a yelp.

Confusion passed over my mother's and aunt's faces as they looked at each other, then back to me. I could only gape at my still tingling hand.

“Mom!” I yelped indignantly, turning to face her and holding my hand up limply in front of her for inspection. Not that there was anything wrong, but that shit had hurt! “Why did you put a *binding spell* on it? And you could’ve told me! That fucking *hurt*-“

“*Language,”* my mother snapped, pushing my hand down and rolling her eyes. “Don’t be dramatic. You know there’s no binding on those.”

“Well it didn’t just spontaneously *shock* me,” I grumbled, rubbing my hand against my jeans.

My aunt watched me, her look fading from confusion to suspicion. “Touch it again,” she requested. My mother’s face mimicked the automatic thoughts of *hell no* that went through my mind.

“No. Why?”

“Oh just do it,” she flapped her hands towards the cards, either out of encouragement or demand. Whichever it was, I rolled my eyes knowing I wasn’t going to get out of touching them again.

“Sure, Auntie Helene. Let me just *shock* myself again for your viewing pleasure!” I whirled and put my hand out, bracing myself for what was probably her magical idea of a joke.

With great hesitation, my fingertips brushed against The Chariot.

There was no shock this time, to my surprise, and I tapped the card twice before pulling away. Was it my imagination, or did something-some spark of magic-try to come with me? “Fine. Don’t believe me.” I turned to my relatives again. “But I’m telling you-“

Power surged behind me, causing me to go silent, and I looked over my shoulder slowly, unsure of what I was going to see.

The card was *changing.* As I watched, the classic art of a woman standing at a war chariot darkened, the image shifting just enough to be recognizably altered with deeper colors and more graphic lines.

“Oh my goddess I *broke it,*” I whispered, knowing I was going to be in so much trouble. “Mom-I’m sorry-I really didn’t-“

Light flared around the card, burning the vision into my mind before I could slam my eyes shut. A few moments later, the shocked cry coming from my aunt had me whirling in her direction.

Surprise rendered me dumb when my eyes landed on the woman on my couch. She hadn’t been there moments ago, and though I didn’t speak, I was just as nonplussed as my aunt. *Had I done this?* I watched wings form

around the pale skinned woman, her face obscured by both those and the feathered headdress that seemed to be a part of her.

“Goddess *bless*,” Aunt Helene stepped closer, lips parted in amazement. “I’ll be damned. My niece. A *summoner*. *Shit*.” It was as if she didn’t know what to say.

That was fair. I didn’t either.

My mother looked between me and the woman on the couch as if in a daze, and didn’t say speak right away.

“I don’t believe it,” Mom announced suddenly, falling back onto the uncomfortable reading chair behind her. “My daughter. A *summoner.”*

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CHAPTER 1

It was a bitch to have no idea where I was or where I should be going.

Was there a better way to find Aveline than walking around in the dark? Probably. Was I wandering around the city of New Orleans like a tourist? Absolutely.

Unfortunately, I couldn't really stop to ask someone if they'd seen an elemental witch being dragged around by a coven of angry women.

Or, I supposed I could, but I wasn't sure I'd quite get the response I was hoping for.

And I needed to find my cousin Aveline *now.*

Aveline had been born unusual in our family as well, though she wasn't a summoner like me. While once the Levasseur family could only seem to birth hedge witches after my great-great-grandmother, the last summoner of our family died, now both Aveline and I both were proof that the dry spell was over. Aveline's elemental powers had awoken around the time I'd first summoned The Chariot into my living room.

But something was wrong. A frantic message from Aveline had me throwing all my shit into my silver RAV4. Luckily, most of what I needed was still packed nice and neat, since I'd just moved out of my dorm room. I'd called mom to let her know where I was going, so she hopefully wouldn't worry. I'd also asked her not to tell my Aunt Delphine about the message.

Not yet, at least. She would freak out if she knew Aveline was missing, and I didn't need that extra stress in my life right now.

Help me. New Orleans Coven won't let me leave. Sombre Oak.

Hopefully, Aveline had just been drunk and messing with her magic. She'd sent me weird messages before that caused my candles to light up and notes to write themselves, but usually they were the ramblings of an intoxicated twenty-five year old, not the clear cut message I got this morning that continued to play over and over in my head.

I'd gotten the New Orleans part and had broken as many speed laws as was feasible, which had put me in the city just after full dark. Now I was wandering around by foot, with only the vaguest idea of where I should be based on the small tug of Aveline's magic that I could feel like a string wrapped around my ribs.

I stopped, running my fingers through my long blonde and pink hair as I sighed in exhaustion. Me being this tired wasn't helpful, but I couldn't just stop looking and take a nap.

"Excuse me," I looked up from my staring contest with the sidewalk, surprised to see a strikingly attractive man trying to pass me on the walkway

"Sorry." Ingrained politeness won out over my anxiety and I stepped off of the sidewalk into the lush grass at my left. Two other men followed the first, who was only slightly taller than me and with blonde hair only a shade more golden.

One of the men behind him, his skin dark olive and his green eyes wicked, gave me a curling grin but didn't slow down.

They obviously knew where they were headed by the way they strode confidently along the street.

Unlike me.

"Excuse me!" my common sense lost the battle with my urgency as I called out.

The last man, who trailed the beautiful blonde and his Cheshire Cat of a companion, turned to look at me with amber-orange eyes framed with long lashes. I'd thought his skin was the same tone as his smirking friend, but now I saw that he was darker complected, with a full mouth made for smiling.

"Can you help me?" I called, seeing that they *had not stopped.*

"We're in a bit of a hurry," the blonde called, not even glancing in my direction. *Rude.*

"Yeah-me too. I'm just-I'm looking for Sombre Oak.'"

Now they *did* stop.

“Can you just-could you just tell me *what that is*?” I stammered.

The orange-eyed man sniffed the air delicately in my direction. *Incredibly* rude. I’d figured him for something other than human, as no human *I’d* ever met had eyes that looked like dull, orange flames.

“She’s a witch,” he murmured quietly, looking at the blonde.

“You’re new here,” the blonde turned to me finally, an easy smile on his features and his red eyes jewel-bright.

Like a *vampire’s.*

I looked away immediately, chastising myself for picking *the worst* group for directions. “It’s fine. I’ll find it on my own-“

“We’re going there,” the still-grinning one in the middle spoke with an accent that I couldn’t begin to place. “You’re a witch; I know why you’re going. Sad that they’re bringing so much new blood for this.” He glanced at the blonde, who still watched me. *“la nahtaj hdha.”* The blonde didn’t respond, and he nudged his arm. “Cian?”

“Enough, Akiva. Come with us,” The blonde-Cian-invited, ignoring *whatever* his friend had said.

“What?” My brows knit together but they were walking again.

“Come or don’t,” *Akiva* didn’t look back. The third looked back to me curiously. When I found his gaze again, black canine ears sat twitching on his head, bases concealed in his black hair, and a fluffy tail curled around his thigh.

He was no *wolf*, but past that I could not tell unless I, too, wanted to partially shift.

“Well fuck,” I said to the sidewalk, jamming my hands into the pockets of my black hoodie.

My hoodie wasn’t very cinema-quality ‘save your cousin’ clothing, in the scope of things, but I hadn’t had much time to prepare.

Thinking of Aveline brought me to my current conundrum. The three men-one of whom was a vampire and the other some kind of shifter-were getting further and further away. And what the hell was *Akiva?*

They didn’t seem to care whether I followed or not, and I had to make a choice. Should I follow them and possibly have to fight my way out if something went wrong, or keep walking around New Orleans like an idiot?

“You’re such an idiot, George,” I muttered to myself. Hesitantly I picked up the pace, catching up to the strangers with deliberate slowness.

Once I was close enough to hear their hushed conversation, they slowed and let me join them, rather than allowing me to trail behind. I sort-of appreciated it. The vampire was still leading the way with long, confident strides, and I didn't need to question whether he was the leader of this small group or not.

"The disagreement between the witches and the vampires is well known around here," Akiva explained, lips curled into a sneer. "The coven must be desperate, to send such a new witch into a place she did not even know existed."

A *disagreement* between witches and vampires? What in the world had my cousin gotten herself into?

"I-umm." I stumbled over my words. "I just…support the…New Orleans Coven," I shrugged, trying not to give them anything to harp on.

Akiva scoffed while the shifter stayed quiet, eyes fixed on the blonde. "You witches are all the same; you are dedicated to any cause your covens beg you to help with."

"*Enough*, Akiva," the vampire called back, voice infinitely patient and empty of any kind of irritation.

Akiva scowled, eyes never leaving mine. As if it was *my fault* he was being scolded. My stomach turned and I looked away, as if to escape his scrutiny.

"Here." The still-unnamed man on my right spoke suddenly, pointing to a name over the wrought iron gate above us. It cut the tension, and drew Akiva's attention away from me. "This is Sombre Oak."

"*What?*" I gaped, stopping in my tracks. Trepidation danced with the relief I felt at finding my destination so quickly. Still, I wasn't prepared for the place to be a cemetery. How fucking cliche that I would be lead to a graveyard by a technically-dead guy. Still, I could feel the bond between my magic and Aveline's tugging at that place between my ribs, regardless of my reluctance.

Cian stopped before we could enter the gate, frowning. I tried to follow his gaze, squinting my eyes to see what he was glaring at.

Three women came into view, seemingly appearing out of thin air between two mausoleums. They approached us, strides confident and air demanding. My stomach clenched and I gripped the hem of my hoodie, worrying the well worn fabric between my fingers.

“Cian,” the oldest woman, her hair silver and her red eyes bright, grinned humorlessly at the vampire. “You came. I had thought you would not.”

“ I came to stop your problematic disagreement,” the dark-eyed vampire snapped, showing fang. “As I told you I would.”

The old witch stared at him, gaze inscrutable. “So you did. But why should we believe that you’d be any different than Gavin, should you *convince* him to step down.” She sounded unbelieving, at best. Mocking, at worst.

The conversation was going right over my head, and before Cian could speak again, I broke in. “Sorry-who’s Gavin?”

All six preternaturals turned to look at me in varying degrees of confusion.

“You brought in a visiting witch without even telling her his *name*?” Akiva laughed scornfully. “You really *are* pathetic, Colette.”

The silver haired witch looked at him sharply. “*Brought* her? I had thought she was with you, as she is not one of mine. Nor have I called in any witches not of my coven.”

“Sorry-not really-but I’m not with your coven. But I’m not with the vampire here either. I came for my cousin. She’s in trouble, and I’m going to take her home.”

“Your cousin?” The black-haired witch who stood at the coven leader’s left spoke for the first time, her voice low and naturally harsh to my ears.

“Actually,” I shoved my black framed glasses up my nose nervously. “My cousin Aveline Levasseur.” I wrung the fabric of my hoodie between my fingers once more, my heavily bitten-nails rubbing against the fabric. “If she’s here, she’s coming home with me.” I hesitated, then added hastily. “*Please*.”

“Keeping witches as *hostages* now, Colette?” Akiva was not afraid to step into the cemetery and did so before the blonde could grab him to jump into the verbal fray. “How lowly Gavin has made you fall-“

“We’ll let her go,” Colette ignored him, her eyes on mine. “After tonight, she is free to leave us.”

I looked between the groups. “Okay well, forgive my confusion but what’s happening *tonight*?”

When the witches didn’t answer, Cian did. “They’ve thrown down the gauntlet for the vampires in New Orleans,” he explained, gaze locked on

Colette's which she met unflinchingly. "They intend to kill their leader and drive out the Clade of New Orleans."

My brows shot upward. "*What?* That's really *stupid*. My cousin would never agree to that-" It dawned on me, then. "Air has powerful protection properties," I mumbled, mostly to myself. The puzzle pieces locked together slowly, as nobody wanted to explain what the hell was happening.

Then it hit me. "Are you channeling her air magic? Is she *okay* with you doing that? Does she even *want* to be here?" I had a feeling the answer was a loud, echoing *no.*

The coven leader finally turned to look at me once more. "I only need her for tonight," she said again. "Then you may have your cousin-"

"No," I interrupted, voice tight with anger as my heart beat loudly in my throat. I wondered if I was going to throw up. "You can't just *keep* my cousin here. If you do, I'll make you regret it." I stammered the words nervously, but I *meant* them.

All six preternaturals stared at me, none of them looking particularly frightened, and my shoulders fell. "You *can't* do that to Aveline. And I meant what I said."

"You wouldn't need to if you'd agree to my proposal," Cian broke in. "I told you I would get rid of Gavin and those who won't follow me."

Colette was still contemplating me with nothing more than curious scrutiny. "And I ask you, again, why I should do so? What makes you think I care for you ruling more than Gavin?"

"Because I will not make the quarter run red with the blood of witches. *I* will not terrorize your witches for merely *living* their lives, Colette."

"But will you swear it?" Colette pressed, still not inviting him into the cemetery. "Words are cheap. Especially from an old vampire like yourself."

"I can swear to you that I will not persecute nor show favoritism to *anyone*, lest they cross me."

I had no idea what was going on here. I didn't think a vampire could just declare themselves king of a city's clade, but to be quite honest I knew very little about vampires save the common knowledge that everyone-even humans-knew.

"You know as well as I that declaring yourself their King is not enough. That's not how it works. But if you think you can *convince* Gavin and his trusted so easily, be my guest." Colette's mouth pressed into a thin line. She was considering it, even though she obviously thought it impossible.

I kept silent as the witches and vampire slung half-insults and insinuations throughout their conversation. The most important thing here was *Aveline*, and if this little spat could get me closer to her walking out of this cemetery with me tonight, then so be it. But I doubted I should just let them go about their business without making it known that she'd be leaving with me.

"I'll help," I said without thinking, regrettably drawing their attention to me. "I can help," I repeated, trying to sound more sure of myself than I actually was.

"We don't need a *witch*," Akiva sneered, the epitome of dismissiveness.

"But we'll take her," Cian's voice was firm. He looked to Colette. "We'll take the witch," he said at last. "To show our unity with the witches of New Orleans, I will show you that I bare no ill-fated will to your kind."

"Yes but-" I broke off. The face that I was *not* a witch of this coven seemed to be a moot point. I didn't try to correct the mistake. "Okay," I finished lamely. "But you *promise* you'll let my cousin go when we return?" Now I turned my attention to Colette. Belatedly I realized it was the request of a child, but I couldn't take it back now.

"Of course," she inclined her head. "You have my word as leader of the New Orleans Coven that if you return here with Gavin's head, I will return your cousin immediately."

Akiva scoffed and pulled back, already walking out of the cemetery and brushing past Cian and the shifter.

"Come on, then," Cian sighed, gesturing to me. "Unless you're going to reconsider."

"Not at all," I mumbled, hightailing it out of the cemetery and following the three men.

I felt as if I'd been standing on a bridge with both ends on fire and I'd had to make the decision on which seemed less deadly. Perhaps I'd chosen wrong, but I hadn't had much of a choice. The coven leader didn't exactly humor my request just by me saying *please.* Akiva was obviously pissed at my continued nearness to him, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I tugged on the hem of my hoodie, trying to pull it down as if I could hide my fear. As if the vampire couldn't *tell* already. There were reasons witches didn't trust vampires, but here I was; following the *lion* into the proverbial *lion's den.*

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CHAPTER 2

"I'm not going to bite you," Cian called over his shoulder, scowling as he saw the distance between the three of them and me. "Indra wouldn't approve," he flashed the shifter a quick grin that he returned easily.

"So Indra is the only thing keeping me *un*bitten, then?" I mused unable to keep myself from checking over my shoulder. The cemetery was long gone, but the image of the three witches whispering amongst themselves had me uneasy. They were clearly speaking about us, and me in particular. Had they been able to sense my dual nature?

Probably-hopefully-not. But more than that, where was Aveline? Was she all right? My stomach churned and I found my hands inching towards the hem of my shirt again.

"Do you think the witches will send a spell after us?" Akiva asked, amused. "So you watch our back like our very own watchdog?"

"Are you admitting to needing someone to watch your back?"I quipped, lengthening my stride to catch up with their hastened steps. His words had made me drop my hands. I didn't want them to see how nervous I was.

"Have you ever fought a vampire?" Cian asked as I caught up to their unnatural quick pace. I looked over to him, catching the distant look on his face.

"No."

"Have you ever fought anything?" Akiva sneered.

"Not to *death*," I said finally. "My family taught me how to protect myself with my magic." I did *not* add that I'd worked with my cards in practice fights since I'd learned to summon the magical Forms and Aspects

within them. I'd never killed anyone, but I wasn't completely helpless either.

"Then you should stay back," Indra spoke, his voice lighter and kinder than the other two. He met my gaze and smiled amicably. "We can handle Gavin's clade." His voice was softer than both Cian's and Akiva's, and he seemed content to let them do most of the talking.

He also wasn't a vampire, so I didn't have to worry about him invading my mind through my eyes. "I'm not defenseless. I won't stand back and let you do all the work getting my cousin back."

"Watch out Indra," Akiva's lips spread into a chuckle as he nudged Indra. "The little witch looks like she's going to growl at you and show you a pair of puppy fangs herself."

His words made me falter, and I self-consciously ran my tongue over my teeth. My fangs *weren't* showing, were they? No. All I found against my tongue were my flat, human teeth.

The fact that my hybrid ass was trying to remain a secret with a vampire, a shifter, and an as-yet-unidentified jerk was not lost on me. It wouldn't do me any favors to announce to them that I did in fact have fangs as well.

I doubted they'd believe me without me showing them my partially shifted state that was akin to Indra's. It was rare for a hybrid to make it to adulthood, so for me to be standing here at all was almost a miracle. Our immune systems were like china shops before puberty, while everything and every*one* around us were bulls looking to break shit. But as hybrids matured, they grew stronger and more resilient. It wasn't a radical change exactly, but I noticed when I stopped needing to go to the emergency room so much after I'd turned fifteen.

My mom had never wavered in her love for me, even though parents of hybrids weren't well looked upon. A lot of people accused her of wanting a powerful child, since hybrids were born of two magical heritages and carried the genes of both. But that wasn't the case. She loved my father, and I'd been a happy accident.

I threw my first punch at some kid in elementary school who'd told me I was wrong, that she'd lied to me to spare my feelings. He took it back. I got suspended. Mom had taken me for ice cream and a gentle lecture.

"We'll stop for you to throw some protections on us before we get there," Akiva's voice broke into my thoughts and I pushed my glasses up

my nose as I looked at him. “I don’t know what exactly you do, but you can at *least* do that, yes?” he asked impatiently.

“He isn’t usually this unfriendly,” Cian spoke before I could cobble together a reply, turning to me with a smile that reached his eyes. My own eyes seemed to find his like a magnet, and for a split second I forgot about my cousin. His eyes were gorgeous. Frankly, *all* of him was gorgeous. That thought was dashed when I remembered that vampires could invade a person’s mind through eye contact. I had a plethora of secrets I didn’t need him digging for in my head.

I looked away as quickly as I could, but Cian shook his head.

“I won’t spin your thoughts or your perception,” he promised. “I have no need to, and if I wanted to, I could’ve done it seven times by now.”

I could feel my eyes crinkle and my lips pursed together. *Oh*, I wanted to say. So you mean you’ve thought about invading my mind. That’s cool and all. *Not*. I schooled my expression into one of pure nonchalance when I noticed Cian watching me, feeling slightly remorseful for the thought. But I didn’t have much practice with vampires. How was one supposed to resist staring in appreciation at a face like Cian’s?

“I can ward you,” I said finally, then dug into my fake leather thigh bag for a couple of glass vials, my fingers brushing my tarot deck as I did so. “And I have these.” I pulled the three vials free, the red liquid within splashing about.

Akiva snatched one from my fingers, observing it with wide, yellow-green eyes.

“They’re-“

“Not very well made,” Akiva interrupted, handing them back just as quickly and carefully not letting his fingers touch mine. “Useless against vampires.”

My eyebrows rose. “Well excuse me for not being a dust riddled, undead *creature of the night* like some people.”

“Dust riddled I will give you,” Akiva said after a brief contemplation. “And I’ll allow creature of the night, as my schedule is very in sync with Cian’s.” The vampire flashed him a smirk and chuckled under his breath. “However, I am *not* undead-“

“Well,” Cian looked back at me. “He might not be *technically* undead, but I’d still give it to you.”

My eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Ghoul?”

Akiva scoffed. “I am not *grey* or *withered*.”

“Particularly well preserved zombie?”

He didn’t grace me with an answer, only scowled.

“He’s a lich,” Indra murmured, smiling.

The lich in question scowled harder.

“A lich?” My eyes widened in surprise and my voice came out higher than I had intended. “That’s almost as rare as a-“ I swallowed the words *hybrid* and *summoner* before speaking again. “Loa,” I said at last, having to cast around for a suitable replacement. We were in New Orleans, after all. This was the only place one could reasonably *meet* a Loa, but it was still almost unheard of.

“Do you even know what a lich *is*?” Akiva asked haughtily.

I looked at him, eyes wide and innocent. “I believe if I read correctly, you are a particularly well preserved zombie, yes?”

His eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to speak, only for Cian to cut him off with a laugh. “You’re working very hard to irritate him for a hedgewitch,” he said. “It’s a pity I won’t even know your name before he slices into you with his *khopesh.*”

“Yeah, I have no idea what that is,” I admitted.

“A lich?” Akiva didn’t sound surprised.

“A-a *khopesh*?” I said, hopefully pronouncing it correctly.

Akiva sniffed at me, but did not deign to answer.

“I’m George,” I added, remembering that Cian had mentioned my name.

“George,” Akiva repeated. “That’s a man’s name, is it not?”

“My name is *Goergette*,” I explained. “But I really feel like that’s a name for a poodle, not a person. So everyone calls me George. What’s a *khopesh*?” I asked again.

“I will show you when I use it to cut a head off of a vampire, *George*,” Akiva promised. “Then you can tell your cousin all about it when we get her back for you.”

My steps slowed. “You care about my cousin Aveline?” My voice had gone small and I spoke slowly, not really believing what he said.

“That’s the reason we let you come along, is it not?”

“I thought I was here to prove your good will towards the witches or whatever.”

“You can absolutely believe that, *sahira.”*

Cian slowed, causing me to nearly bump into him. I looked around the small parking lot, taking that moment to try to guess which car was his. There weren't many cars to choose from, but the fact it wasn't full and the eerie tint cast by the cloudy sky made me more than a little anxious to get the hell out of there.

A jingle from Cian's direction thankfully drew my attention from the shadows and keys emerged from his pocket.

"We have to drive there?" I asked. My own car was…well. I wasn't sure *where*, to be honest, and I'd need a minute to activate the tracking spell I had on it just for this reason.

"This is the twenty-first century. Don't most people drive from one place to another?" Cian's words were edged with humor as he threw a smirk over one shoulder and tapped a button on the key fob. I supposed sarcasm ran heavily in their little group.

A click and the flash of lights in my peripheral vision had me lurching back in surprise. There may have not been many cars in the lot, but for some reason I wasn't expecting it to be the car closest to the entrance. I was absolutely expecting to have to walk to the back of the lot, into the eerie, reaching shadows and questionable darkness. I had been wrong and that was absolutely okay. Scary walk successfully averted.

I turned to the car and my eyes rolled. Of *course* a vampire would be driving this car.

He drove a *Jaguar.* I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised, but still my eyes narrowed in a glare behind my glasses as I scrutinized the steel grey sedan. I didn't know the model, as I did not make a habit of looking at cars I'd never be able to afford, but it was *nice*.

As I stared like an idiot, Indra edged past me and opened the back driver's side door, then looked to me pointedly.

"Did you think we'd let you sit in the front?" Akiva laughed, going to the passenger side and sliding into the front seat gracefully.

"It's not that," I sighed, wavering as Cian got into the driver's seat.

"We won't hurt you," Indra pressed. "I know this goes against probably everything you were taught," he was right, "But we're just going to go kill some vampires to get your cousin back." He met my gaze, black canine ears turned towards me as he waited patiently.

"I hope I don't regret this," I mumbled, bending down and shimmying into the car. I scooted over to the far side, considering how much of an

accident it would be if I kneed Akiva's seat. It wasn't like I'd ever do it on purpose. At least, that's what I'd tell him. The overpriced car still had that new car smell, and I tried hard to keep my feet squarely on the floor mat. I wasn't going to be the one to fuck up the interior.

Indra slid in beside me, closing the door as Cian started the engine.

"Where are we going?" I asked, wanting to be in the know and hoping they wouldn't just name a place I was unfamiliar with.

"The swamp," Cian's voice was calm, but the jolt in my stomach was anything but.

"*I beg your pardon?"* This was beginning to seem like a body dump, not a violent meet up.

Cian pulled away from the curb and I met Akiva's eyes in the rearview mirror. I hadn't meant to, but I did a double take anyway. His eyes were so bright that he practically lit the car up all on his own. "Do you know where you *are*?" he inquired breezily.

"In a vampire's car, in a city I've never visited, in a state that I guess I can now strike off the unvisited list," I replied curtly. "My only knowledge of swamps and bayous comes from television shows."

"It's not far," Indra put in helpfully, his eyes glittering orange in the darkness.

Was I the only one here with eyes that didn't glow?

Or-at least-eyes that weren't glowing *right now.*

I settled back into my seat, running my fingers along the bridge of my nose and dislodged my glasses.

This was going to be a long night.

The drive wasn't long, but the thirty odd minutes had done wonders for soothing my anxiously churning insides. However, the moment Cian pulled up to a gate and cut the engine, my body tensed and my fears came right back.

Slowly I eased out of the car, spinning in a circle to take in the otherwise-empty gravel and dirt lot. It smelled damp, like the woods, but the air had a humid edge to it that had sweat beading on my forehead. Bereft of lights, the swamp was almost completely dark, and I could barely make out the individual shapes of trees that rose towards the cloudy sky.

Cian, Indra and Akiva had no issue with the swamp. Their little bubble of silence felt comfortable from an outside view, and I very much doubted

they felt any of the anxiety currently causing me to want to run in the other direction.

Anaconda had not prepared me well for this walk, despite watching the old movie at least a hundred times. At least there would be no giant snakes looming in the swamp.

I hoped.

I caught up to Indra, the only one who I found non-intimidating.

"You have to be careful," Indra was saying to me, voice low. "Watch your step. Especially if we have to go in the swamp proper." Ah shit. I knew this was going to happen. Wet socks were going to be the least of my problems, and I *prayed* that we weren't going to find anything here other than vampires.

"There aren't alligators here, right?" I asked slowly. "That's… somewhere else, yes?" I pulled away from reaching, spindly branches and nearly walked into Indra.

Indra glanced at me in sympathy. What a nice guy.

"Perhaps if you get eaten by alligators I shall collect your pieces and resurrect you," Akiva offered happily. "Should I feel inclined to do so."

I ignored him to reach into my bag, dodging my tarot cards once more, and rummaged around until I produced three small bronze charms.

"Here." I handed Cian the lion charm, Indra the wolf, and Akiva the butterfly charm. I'd received the butterfly as a gift from some college acquaintance, and it wasn't by accident that he got the one I disliked. Was I being petty? Absolutely.

"A *butterfly*?" Akiva spat, turning over the bronze piece in his palm. "What is this for?"

"A very pretty butterfly," I told him blithely. "It's your ward. And I'm so sorry. It's the last one I had." That was a lie. I had three more in my bag that I loved much more than the butterfly. It had been luck that I'd grabbed it with the other two first. "Just put them in your pocket. I keep the wards active on them all the time."

"You have yourself warded, right?" Indra asked. "And you're sure you want to come with us?"

I touched the golden rune hanging from the choker at my throat. "Mine will hold out much, *much* longer than those," I promised. "But if something happens and you need another one, let me know."

"You just said you were out," Akiva scoffed.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Of charms for you.”

Cian didn’t bother to hide his smile and looked over the lion once more before pocketing it. “He did offer to rescue any body parts from alligators,” The vampire pointed out sweetly.

“So he did,” I sighed, though I still didn’t offer him a different charm. “So where are we going?”

“Into the swamp. Into the *dark*,” Akiva said softly, eyes searching the trees. “Hold onto Indra if you like.”

I didn’t move to do so, and shook my head at his outstretched hand. I had just as good night vision as any of them, thanks to my wolf heritage.

“Suit yourself,” Akiva shrugged, clicking his tongue twice and making me flinch in surprise.

“What was-“ I broke off as a shape hurtled down at us from the sky. Akiva lifted his arm, completely at ease, and a gigantic *bird* landed on his covered forearm, making soft cooing noises to him as if chastising him for being away.

“What is that?” I breathed to Indra.

“That’s Horus,” Indra replied. “Akiva’s familiar. He’s a bearded vulture.”

“He’s *huge*,” I went on. At my words the bird suddenly whipped its head to face me and with a start I noticed its bright, crimson ringed eyes.

Akiva spoke softly to him, but I ignored his words to the vulture and simply gawked at the bird. I’d certainly never seen a raptor like him, and it wasn’t every day one landed on a man’s arm only two feet from me while he cooed at it in affectionate tones.

While I stared, Horus took off once more, wings flapping erratically as Akiva tossed his arm upward to help the vulture gain flight.

“He will take us to where Gavin and his trusted wait,” Akiva spoke confidently as he looked to Cian. “And he says they have been here for a while.”

The vampire dipped his head in a nod, then grinned at Indra. “You good?” he asked, pulling the shifter to him and pressing a kiss to his temple.

Oh.

A second later he did the same for Akiva.

Double oh.

Or perhaps, in this case, triple.

Cian looked to me and I raised a brow. “Do I get a kiss too?” I quipped softly, my nails digging crescent-shaped marks into my palms as I fought not to tremble.

“Would you like one?” Cian’s eyes danced.

If he came close enough to kiss me, I was sure I’d do something stupid. Like shift on the spot and *bite* him.

“Not at all,” I replied, trying to keep my smile in place.

Akiva was still staring at the sky, and when he turned his head slightly I was surprised to see the same crimson ring around his eyes that the vulture had.

“I found them,” Akiva stated after a moment, and took off at a brisk walk, even with his face turned to the sky and eyes looking upwards instead of at the path in front of him. How did he not trip over the logs and branches that littered the ground? Did he not mind the mud splattering his jeans or the long, thin branches that brushed at his hands?

“What about alligators? And uh-swamp quicksand?” I hissed, hurrying to keep up with Indra.

Cian’s voice was smooth and matter-of-fact in the darkness. “Don’t get eaten and don’t fall in.”

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CHAPTER 3

I was tired of walking. Tired of driving, tired of this stupid, not fun adventure that had taken over my night. I should've done a tarot reading for myself before getting out of my damn car. Even a quick one, to see just what I was getting myself into down here.

None of the three men seemed like the 'let's stop so the witch girl can rest and tell her own immediate future' kind of guys, so I kept my complaints silent.

Aveline was so damn lucky that I loved her.

A bird shrieked, the sound making Akiva stop. His eyes closed hard and he rubbed them like they'd gone dry, and when he opened them once more they had returned to their normal yellow-green, and gestured to the grassy clearing that we stood at the edge of.

"We're here," he said, not bothering to be quiet as he strode forward and into the tall, untamed grass.

"Because your bird told you so?" I asked, only slightly mocking.

Akiva glanced back, but did not deign to reply.

Cian walked with him, pulling to the front, and Indra didn't wait for me to catch up to Akiva.

Unfortunately, that gave me the rear.

I let out an unsteady breath, heart racing as I looked around the clearing and into the trees surrounding us. My night vision without being half shifted was not perfect, but I could see movement in the trees all the same.

"Gavin." Cian's voice echoed and if my wolf ears were visible I would've flattened them at the noise. "I know you're here."

“I’m not hiding from you.” The deep, amused voice held a slight rasp and no hint of surprise. He spoke from the middle of the clearing, and when I turned to look at him I felt my stomach clench. No one had been there a moment ago.

Bowing my head as if to look at my feet, I studied him from under my lashes. His hair, cut very close to his skull, was so dark that it was invisible in the night. Red eyes stayed fixed on Cian, as if he hadn’t bothered to notice me.

I had a feeling he was no stranger to being challenged by optimistic vampires, if the way he carried himself and lifted his chin arrogantly were anything to go by. Something glittered in his eyebrow and at his lip; gold piercings, I realized belatedly. They seemed to catch the light at all angles, drawing my attention.

A twig broke and I looked to the side, seeing a vampire standing only a few yards to my left, half-hidden in darkness.

She wasn’t the only one. There were at least six or seven vampires in the clearing now, and not all the shadows in the swamp were trees.

I had not realized that they truly moved so *fast.* Hearing tales was one thing; seeing it was another.

The vampire at my left was a very dark skinned woman, with full lips and a slim figure that I would have envied under any other circumstance. I refused to meet her eyes, instead fixing my gaze on her mouth as she parted her lips to show me her bright, white fangs.

“You’ve brought it on yourself,” Cian was saying, though I found myself much more focused on the woman than him. “You’ve subjugated the witches and even the shape shifters hate you for how you treat them. We are not *above* anyone-“

“Don’t lecture me,” Gavin broke in, lips parting to show sharp fangs in a taunt. “You have no right to; we *all know* you’ve been anxious for a chance like this for ages.”

“You’re wrong. I have never desired to rule over a clade, but you’re making it impossible for me to look away. Leave, Gavin. Get out of New Orleans-out of Louisiana. I will let you go, but only if you go *now.*”

A cold shock went through me and I looked to Cian, brows furrowed as unsureness spiraled through my thoughts. Colette had demanded Gavin’s head in exchange for my cousin. Would Cian really just let him *go?*

Perhaps I really had walked into this like an idiot.

“I’ll tell you what,” Gavin replied, voice silky smooth. “I *won’t* leave. And if you fight me, you’re going to lose at least one of your friends.” I saw enough of his face to see it tilt pointedly in my direction.

What a fucking vote of confidence.

“Careful,” Cian cautioned, though I wasn’t sure if he spoke to Gavin or me.

“Here are my terms, Cian Branwen. You can leave. You can take your witch and go. But you must choose between the others; do you want to keep your lich or your hellhound? You’ve challenged the *king* of New Orleans and I can’t let that slide without teaching you a lesson. So who will you take, and who stays with me?” Gavin’s voice was full of amusement, and finality.

Cian honest to goddess *laughed.* He chuckled like Gavin had told him a particularly amusing joke and spread his arms wide. “You think you’ll-what-send me running with my tail between my legs and my bonded will simply cut ties with me and join *you*?” His eyes narrowed. “Don’t make me laugh. And stop making a fool of yourself. This is your last chance.”

Power enveloped the clearing, rifling through the grass like long fingers and twisting around my limbs as it chased away the warmth in the air.

Was this *Cian’s* power? How did a vampire *have* this much power?

“You leave…or you die.” He tilted his head to the side. “So what will it be?”

“Neither. Kill the witch,” Gavin ordered off-handedly. “But not the others.”

He was gone in a rush of movement. My eyes darted to Cian, but I was met only with a burst of air. The two vampires collided a few yards away from me and my lungs seemed to freeze mid-breath.

If Gavin came out on top, what would happen to me?

I forced myself away from the thought. I wasn’t helpless, and I didn’t need Cian to come to my rescue. Besides, the vampire I was quietly cheering for seemed to be winning.

At least for the moment.

Cian’s hand was around Gavin’s throat, and in a flash he’d knocked Gavin to the ground, hiding much of him in the tall grass.

The ground under me trembled at the impact and I nearly stumbled in surprise, hands brushing the tips of tall weeds.

Okay, he was probably fine.

“You stupid witch.” The vampire nearest me was stalking forward, fangs flashing bright. “You should never have come here.” She surged forward, too quick for me to follow, only to slam hard into my invisible barrier.

I gasped at the sudden drain to my rune as it mitigated her attack.Thankfully I wouldn’t be able to feel the wards on the men; they would protect them from any lethal damage until they were used up without affecting me whatsoever.

“George!” Indra whirled to me, but a vampire caught him around the waist and took both of them from my view. Akiva was also too far from me, though I could hear the *snick* of metal and hissed curses that I couldn’t understand.

That left me an entire clearing to work with.

“Did you ever stop to wonder why I came here? Why I’d throw my luck in with his?” I asked as the woman rounded on me, her fingers curled loosely.

She hissed, licking over her fangs before finally speaking. “Because you thought those *men* would protect you,” The vampire flicked her fingers dismissively towards the others while she circled me like a lioness.

“I’ve never met them before tonight. Why would I assume they’d protect me?” I lifted my hand, fingers twisting slightly, and watched her as my card materialized, the white lines glowing between my fingers on the black surface.

Her face fell in confusion. “What is that?”

I smiled at her, maybe a bit manically. My attention was focused on channeling my inherent power into the card that I held. I could summon either an Aspect of the card’s power or the Form of the card itself. In my hand I held The Chariot, which would give me either incredible agility and near-flight, or *her.*

I chose her.

The ground lit up around my feet, light seeping from the earth itself and soaking into the card.

“What the hell?” I heard someone hiss, but I was focused only on the magic required to call the Form of the Chariot. Not even the closed-fist blow of a vampire hitting my wards was enough to deter me, though the tug of energy made me note grimly that the rune wouldn’t last too much longer under that kind of strength.

Suddenly the light from my magic dimmed; ground fading to darkness once more. I blinked in the sudden dimness, half-glad for the brightness to no longer be assaulting my vision.

The card disintegrated into white sparks, and as I dropped my hand to my side I felt long fingers curl around mine as heavy, folded wings pressed against my back.

I didn't need to turn around. I knew that the Form of the Chariot stood at my back filled with my magic and my will. A breeze seemed to ruffle the feathers of her wings, and her pale skin was cool against my hand, the ornate rings on all of her taloned fingers biting into my flesh.

"You are a summoner," the woman said, lifting slightly from her crouch. "But you're-"

The Chariot Form *screamed* and I stepped aside as she dove past me, long arms extended to dig into the woman's shoulders and tossed her backwards. Large pearly wings obscured most of her from me, though as she moved I could see flashes of the long white hair and feathered headdress she wore that covered the upper part of her face.

As she fell on the downed vampire, claws ripping backward and glistening with black blood, I whirled to face the other side of the clearing. Akiva took that moment to separate a man's head from the rest of his body neatly with what I assumed to be his *khopesh* and was already rounding on another that was attempting to catch him unawares just as Horus hurtled down from the sky and battered the vampire with his enormous wings.

The Chariot screamed her victory, her cry like a raptor's, and I twisted my hand to redirect her to a vampire circling Cian and Gavin's fight before she could deliver a killing blow. Without hesitation the Form used her powerful legs to lunge forward, knocking one of the women into the thicker trees, where she followed.

"George watch out!" Indra's voice brought me up short and I whirled into the face of a pale vampire who grinned, one hand balled into a fist that made my stomach twist in fear. He hit my wards with his closed fist, the motion a blur, and I felt it in my gut like a roil of nausea. My barrier shattered around me and I gasped, throwing my hands up in front of me like a plea to stop him from coming closer.

He knocked my arms aside easily and threw me to the ground, fangs visible as he tackled me. I lifted my hands again, pressing them to his bare chest that was slick with blood. *Please Goddess,* I wanted to wail. *Don't let*

him kill me. Not that she could do much, with the vampire already moving for my throat.

His fangs never found my neck.

Indra was there, though he had shifted to a great, black furred dog sometime in the past few seconds. He roared in the vampire's face, his chest igniting like fresh embers and eyes echoing the appearance of orange flames.

He was a hellhound.

Indra knocked the vampire down and snapped his jaws closed around the man's neck, ignoring the pained screeches and writhing body of the man he had pinned. Instead he only shook the vampire like a rag doll until he went limp, the screaming becoming gurgled protests and then nothing. Finally he looked up, ears twisted back, and I stepped towards him, gore stained muzzle and all.

"Thank you-" my words were cut off by another vampire grabbing Indra and flinging the canine to the ground. He yelped, and I twisted to see where my summon was.

Unfortunately, when I'd been knocked down, The Chariot had faltered as well. Now she was being pinned by two vampires and I knew I'd have to give her an extra burst of my power for her to get up.

But I didn't.

Instead I called her back to me, the magic coming to rest in my body again. Inhaling sharply, I found that the air in the clearing stank like blood and I lifted my hand, fingers and thumb pressed together like I already held something between them while I jerked at my magic. Light spilled from my fingers, the Devil appearing between them.

This summon took much less energy, which was good as I was waning after the Form of the Chariot had taken such a beating. I didn't need the Devil herself; only what she wielded. There was no bright glow, no hesitation; in an instant the card had disintegrated into red particles of magic, and in my hand I held a long, coiled whip with a solid black and gold handle.

"Let him go!" I yelled, scrambling to my feet and twisting the whip to gain momentum with the weapon I held. The vampire only spared me a glance when the leather licked at his face. When he did, I drew back, staying careful not to hit myself as I hit him again.

He dropped Indra, thankfully, and the hellhound leapt to his paws. I cracked the whip *hard* against the man's face.

The vampire never got a chance to retaliate. Indra was too quick for him. The hellhound grabbed the vampire's throat and I hit him once more. Within seconds the hellhound had snapped his fangs clean through the man's throat, causing blood to paint his black coat with streaks of crimson.

Would I be able to do that in my wolf form? Would I be strong enough to take a vampire's head off of his *body*? Was there a wolf-defense-course out there that I'd been missing all this time?

"Are you okay?" I asked, stepping closer and reaching my free hand out to Indra. He surprised me by shifting back, blood still painting his neck and side of his face. He nodded and reached out to touch my hand. "Thank you for saving me," I said in a hushed voice.

"Anytime," Indra replied. "I just-"

A vampire *screamed*, the sound becoming an agonized keen that made us drop our hands and look towards the middle of the clearing.

The fight was decidedly over.

Cian held Gavin's head in one hand, his foot on the dead vampire's chest.

"*Stop!"* he called, his voice sharp. The other vampires hesitated, Akiva shoving one of them back with a scoff.

The keening came from a dark-skinned woman kneeling at the far end of the clearing; a man with similar sharp features with his hand on her shoulder.

"You all *knew* this would happen-you knew what you were doing was wrong." He spun slowly in a circle. Akiva came to stand beside me, eyeing the whip in my hand with a raised brow and a half smirk.

I rolled my eyes but did not let the whip disappear. Akiva's eyes found and held mine, making my heartbeat quicken. At that moment, I didn't want to punch him. It was progress.

"He didn't do anything to you!" the woman screamed. "You did not need to come-"

"I could not ignore your clade any longer," Cian snapped. "Not when the council had turned their eyes on New Orleans because of *you*." He glared at her and she met his gaze without fear or submission.

"You did not need to kill him," she hissed, still not backing down.

“I tried to let him leave.” He looked almost regretfully down at Gavin’s corpse. “So what will the rest of you do? I will not keep you here, if you will not follow me. But it is me or somewhere *far* from this city.” He met the gaze of the seven surviving vampires. “Those are your options.”

Two men dropped immediately to their knees, staring submissively at the ground.

Another followed suit, though was slower to do so.

That left the woman, her companion, and two other vampires.

“No,” she said simply, getting to her feet. “We do not accept these terms, Cian. You are *not* the king of the New Orleans clade. Not to *me*.” She looked to the others and they gathered around her supportively.

“You will die for this,” the woman promised, her red eyes impossibly bright. “You and yours.”

“I’ve had enough.” Cian’s voice was low and he disappeared in a blur of motion, appearing in front of the rebelling vampires. He made a move to grab the woman, but his hand found only empty air and dissipating red mist. The woman and her supporters had vanished.

Her laugh echoed through the clearing, but they were gone.

“Akiva?” Cian didn’t turn.

The lich cast his gaze about, eyes red rimmed once more, but then shook his head. “They are truly gone, though I do not know how,” he admitted.

Cian looked to the three kneeling vampires and gestured for them to get up. “Do you swear fealty to me as your king?” he demanded, blood stained mouth dark in the dim light and dark blood painting his clothes.

The three of them nodded jerkily.

“Out *loud*,” Cian pressed. “You know how this works.”

“I-I swear,” the teenage-looking vampire was the first to speak. The other mumbled their assent after him.

“Go back to your clade and tell the others my ultimatum: you swear, or you leave. There is no in between. Am I understood?”

They didn’t speak. When Cian gestured dismissively they left, disappearing in the shadows of the trees beyond the clearing.

Finally, Cian turned to us.

Specifically, *me*.

“You’re a summoner.” He eyed the whip in my hand, which I gripped tightly still.

“And you’re king of the New Orleans clade,” I shot back, voice faltering. He was much more intimidating now, because of his attitude shift, and because he still held Gavin’s head in his hand.

Inclining his head, he sighed. “You can put that away. I’m still not going to bite you or cloud your mind.”

I didn’t quite trust his words. “You’re hurt,” I said instead, not bothering to look at the wounds on his arms nor the ragged bite on his throat. “Don’t you need blood?”

“I will,” he agreed, a spark of amusement playing across his lips. “And luckily for your racing witch’s heart, I have two willing donors right here.”

“Willing?” Akiva snorted, *khopesh* disappearing. “I think you mean lining up to be bitten by you.” He stepped forward and kissed the blonde vampire, not minding that he was getting blood on his mouth.

I watched, unable to look away as their kiss moved past chaste. Cian kissed down Akiva’s jaw, mouthing over his throat before visibly sinking long fangs into his throat.

I heard Akiva *moan* and that was quite frankly enough for me.

“I’m going back to the car,” I announced, looking everywhere but at them.

They didn’t even *notice*. Indra was nosing around the clearing, turning over bodies and sniffing at dead vampires. I sure as hell didn’t want to join him in his investigation. I didn’t *care*.

I easily followed the traces of my magic back to Cian’s Jaguar, and I briefly considered wiping blood from my hand on it before sitting instead on the ground and letting my whip fall to the ground in a flurry of sparkling magic, settling there before fading to nothing once more.

“Goddess, please protect Aveline,” I whispered to the starry sky above. “Please, let her be okay and let me get her home in one piece tonight.”

If the coven wouldn’t let her go, then I really *would* have to fight them all for her. Would the new *King* of the New Orleans Clade help me? Would Indra and Akiva? Or would they simply disappear once they’d taken me back to town, complacent with what had already been done?

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CHAPTER 4

It was a good thing Cian remembered the head. He'd thrown it in the trunk when he'd arrived back at the car, looking fresh and healed, save for the tears in his jacket.

"You forgot this," he said sweetly, gesturing to the trunk as he slammed it, and I gave him a half-assed smile.

"Thanks." I stood by my side of the car, opening the door after the locks clicked, only for Akiva to lean on it and shut it once more.

"A *summoner*," the lich was very interested, and stood close in front of me. "*La, aasif.* Don't get in yet." He folded his arms and looked me over. "I do not see it."

"What's there to see?" He couldn't *see* what kind of witch I was.

"Don't sell yourself short." Still he pulled away and slid into his own seat, leaving me to roll my eyes and silently scream at how he managed to turn my words on me before getting into the car as well.

The men spoke of the fight, of Cian's new title of King, without asking me for much input. Not that I had much to give. Indra talked less frequently, and within a few minutes was content to rest his face against the window, eyes closed, and listen. I was as well, though I stared at the lights and what landmarks I could make out in the dark.

When we arrived back at the cemetery gates, Cian tossed Gavin's head over the stone and watched it roll to a stop at Colette's feet.

The witch studied it, though didn't touch it, before letting her eyes lift back to Cian's. "So it is done." She did not sound surprised. "And you are a summoner."

It was not a question, and my stomach tightened almost painfully.

“Where’s my cousin?” I asked curtly.

“I don’t suppose we could convince you to join our coven?” Colette spoke as if I hadn’t said a word. “Summoning is a rare gift. The more people who know about your power, the more danger you’re in.” She very pointedly let her gaze drift over the three preternaturals I’d gone to the swamp with.

“Seems like she’s had it worse with you so far than us,” Indra said quietly.

“I’ll be fine, thanks for the concern.” My tone was clipped. “Where’s my cousin?”

“She’s coming now. We do not hold witches captive here.”

What a *lie*. That was exactly what she’d done with Aveline.

Footsteps sounded on the stone and I turned my head to see my cousin sprinting towards me, giving Colette a wide berth before falling into me and causing both of us to nearly collapse.

“You came!” she gasped. “I-I thought I sensed you earlier, but I was so scared-“ She linked her arms around my waist, a fine tremble going through her body.

“Of course I came.” I glared at Colette over her shoulder and Aveline pressed her forehead to mine “Come on, Av.” I wanted to get away from these witches.

“Our invitation is open,” Colette said as I tugged Aveline over the line of cemetery property. “And I truly wish you would reconsider. Witches should stick together. Neither of you are so common as to be wasting your gifts."

I tossed Cian a grateful glance as he stepped between Colette and me, shielding me from her not-so-friendly invitation.

“No,” I snapped again. “We don’t want anything to do with you, so leave us alone.”

Aveline still shook and I turned from the cemetery, *dragging* her along with me.

Once we were out of earshot, I slowed to give my cousin a break. “Are you okay?” I checked her for injury as best I could. It seemed she’d been dragged out of bed in only a thin t shirt and shorts. She didn’t even have *shoes* on.

“I’m fine,” she told me shakily, her blue eyes finding mine. This was nothing like the Aveline I knew. Tear tracks carved pale lines in her dirty

face and I half-heartedly considered going back and summoning The Devil to show the New Orleans Coven just what a summoner could do.

“No!” Aveline grabbed my hand, drawing my attention. “I know what you’re thinking but just…just don’t, okay? I’m fine. They didn’t hurt me, I swear.”

Still I frowned as I looked at her, both of us having stopped on the sidewalk. Aveline shook while I strongly sifted through possibilities of getting back at Colette for what she’d done. One hand curled and uncurled at my side as I fought to not show my emotions on my face.

“What time is it?” she asked finally, looking around us.

“It’s uh-“ I looked at my phone. “About two in the morning.” I couldn’t help the yawn that forced my jaws wide, though I covered it as best I could.

“Where’s your car?” Aveline asked pragmatically. “We’ll go back to my house.”

“And then promptly *leave*?” I asked, walking with her down the sidewalk towards where I’d parked.

“Leave?” She looked at me in confusion. “This is my *home*.”

“Your mother would burn this place to the ground if she knew what happened,” I informed her dryly. “I don’t know why you want to stay.”

Aveline turned to look at me with a wide eyed glance. “Did you tell her?”

“No. And mom said she wouldn’t as long as I texted her before this afternoon.” I yawned again, pulling my keys from my pocket and dropping them into the hand Aveline held out.

I had no qualms with Aveline driving us to her house. I didn’t know my way around the city, after all, and was much too tired to spend the rest of the night *lost*.

I’d never visited Aveline in New Orleans, and I had thought she still lived in an apartment. After she parked my car in the driveway inside the small neighborhood, Aveline got out and stretched as I examined her house in the darkness.

The house was beige, with dark brown wooden shutters and an obnoxiously red door. There was a very small porch leading up from the sidewalk, and her yard was neatly landscaped with a few trees and small bushes.

“I didn’t know you’d bought a house,” I admitted, following her up the sidewalk and catching my keys when she threw them to me.

“Last year,” she told me. “So about five months ago now.”

“And here I’ve been living in a dorm room,” I grumbled good naturedly, flashing her a smile as she opened the door and walked inside.

It was unlocked, but I knew for a fact her house was warded and it would take someone with more power than her to get past her protections.

Like the coven had. Could someone get in again if I combined my magic with her wards? I really didn’t want to wake up to a witch standing over me waiting to sweep me out of bed and to a *cemetery.*

Inside, the floors were hardwood and the house had an open floor-plan. I explored a bit, turning to the left of the door and going around the corner to see a kitchen with a raised counter dividing it from the small dining table and chairs.

The living room that lay between it and the door was large, and Aveline had decorated it with overflowing plants and plush, charcoal furniture. Her tv was hung on the wall, the shelf below it full of dvds and her xbox. Across from it sat a large couch, ottoman, and recliner.

Behind the couch was another set of doors that I assumed led to her yard.

“I have a guest room-two, actually-but no bed,” Aveline explained apologetically. “But I’ll toss you heads or tails for the sofa.”

“Go sleep in your bed,” I laughed, shoving her towards the back hallway.

“Guest bathroom is right here,” she told me, tapping a doorway. She paused, looking back at me in the darkness. “Thanks, George,” my cousin said quietly. “I knew you’d come.”

“Well I sure as shit wasn’t going to leave you with them,” I snorted, making for the bathroom and turning on the light. “Since you know. I *love* you or something.”

Aveline shook her head. “Yeah. I love you *or something* too. We’ll order in when we get up, okay? Good night.”

“Good night,” I replied, closing the door of the bathroom behind me.

From my thigh bag I pulled out my glittered medicine organizer, popping open Friday and dumping the pills into my hand.

Remember to call your doctor and have them transfer your prescriptions, my mother had reminded me, repeating herself at least four times over the last week.

I hadn’t yet, of course. I didn’t even know who I wanted to go see when I moved back in with her.

The thought made me grimace as I swallowed the pills with a handful of water from the faucet. I didn’t have anywhere to go, just yet. I didn’t have a job, and with college over I couldn’t just stay in the dorms.

It wasn’t like I wanted to anyway.

It was awkward to be the oldest person living in the dorms, and I’d done so because of the scholarships I’d received to live on campus. My health had delayed me from going to college for a few years, but thankfully I was much improved from what I had been a few years ago. Now, at twenty-four, I’d been severe illness free for over three years and counting.

The thought of being sick again caused my chest to tighten, but I worked to push the feeling away as best as I could before leaving the bathroom. Aveline’s shower curtain reminded me too much of the white vinyl things in the bathroom of my hospital room and when I was forced to imagine it, I was forced to imagine everything *else* that came along with being in the hospital so much as a kid.

Don’t dwell on it, I chastised myself. *You’re fine. Everything is fine.* It was a lot more believable when my mother or doctor said it, but I did my best to remind myself of the facts.

I was fine. I was here. I was physically *healthy*. There was nothing to worry about right now, except maybe alligators in the neighbors’ pool.

With a loud, theatrical sigh, I fell onto Aveline’s couch, barely managing to drag a blanket over myself and kick my shoes off before falling asleep.

A pillow hit my face, causing me to groan and burrow farther into the fleece blanket over me.

“Five more minutes,” I mumbled, refusing to open my eyes.

“It’s two in the afternoon,” Aveline informed me, picking the pillow up and letting it fall on me again.

“Great. Let me stay here until *two o’ five* in the afternoon,” was my growled reply. I cracked one eye open to glare at my cousin. “I saved your life last night. You could *at least* let me sleep late,” I pointed out tiredly.

“I’m hungry,” she shot back. “Aren’t you hungry too? We’re ordering something.” Her own blue eyes gleamed, pouty lips pulling upwards in her best Cheshire grin. How long had she been up? I studied her, wondering

just how much sleep she had gotten and knowing she wouldn't want to talk about her experience if I pushed her.

"*Ugh*." Begrudgingly I sat up, running my hands through my unkempt hair. Bed head was always such an issue, whether I laid down for five minutes or fifty hours. It was always a rat's nest when I woke up. I stretched, linking my arms over my head as I arched my back.

A moment later a second pair of ears, these white furred and lupine, flicked atop my head. A fluffy tail lay curled around my leg, and I brushed tangles from the fur absently before tucking my blonde and pink hair behind my human ears.

"Haven't seen your ears in awhile," Aveline observed as she sat down beside me. "You ever show them to anyone at school?"

"Nope," I yawned, my tail flopping back onto the sofa. "Everyone knew me as a witch. I didn't want to complicate that,"

With a shrug, Avi leaned over on me, phone in hand, to show me our options for delivery.

"On me," she added. "For ya'know. Driving down here and saving my life and all. I texted your mom, by the way. Told her you were sleeping but everything was fine, so she won't tell *my* mom."

"I really appreciate the food. Can we get Chinese?" I grabbed the tv remote off the ottoman, flipping the smart tv on, and starting up our usual streaming service.

"You're so predictable." She thumbed down the app and tapped once on a logo, then gave me the phone. I scrolled through the options, finally ordering myself sesame chicken and wontons, before handing it back to her. "Oh-get me soy sauce," I added. "For the rice."

She made her own selection, then finished our order before tossing her phone on the table beside her.

"Little Children, Large Crowns?" she asked hopefully.

"Your fixation with those reality shows is disgusting," I sniffed. "And I love it. Let's do it." Navigating to her marked favorite took only a second, and by the time I laid the remote down on the ottoman once more, our shared guilty pleasure was showing in 4K on her wall.

It took the length of an episode for our food to arrive, and by the time the next one was starting, we were set with a small buffet of food and a six pack of vanilla coke. As far as I knew, we were the only two people who enjoyed it in our family, if not in the entire country itself.

My rice was dark with soy sauce and I happily polished off the container before starting on my sesame chicken. Aveline had ordered some kind of teriyaki beef, and we had negotiated the release of three pieces of my chicken for two of her steak. We shared the wontons, and by the time we were finished there was nothing left except fortune cookies.

“Move in with me,” Aveline said suddenly, both of us drowsy from the food and last night’s adventure, as we half-watched another episode.

“What?” I didn’t move from my spot curled up on the sofa.

“I have extra bedrooms. Move in with me.”

“I’m moving back in with my mom,” I reminded her with a sigh.

“Well, don’t do that. You can’t tell me you *actually* want to go back to Ohio.”

I did not in fact, but I stayed silent.

“What are you going to do in Ohio anyway with your degree in *fantasy*?”

“Mythological studies and Folklore,” I corrected automatically. Originally, I’d dreamed of going on to be an anthropologist, but as my time at college dwindled I’d gotten less and less sure of what I wanted. Finally I’d picked up a minor in traditional witchcraft before finishing, but that didn’t do much for me either.

“You could get a job here,” Aveline was saying. “It’s the *capital* of the preternatural, and places always want to hire a witch.”

“And that’s how you became a burlesque dancer?” I asked, not turning to look at her.

She scoffed. “No. I got that job because my boobs look fantastic with pasties on them.”

“What an image.”

“But I’m serious. I don’t *need* you to help with bills, so you could stay for free until you found a job. You’d have your own bedroom, bathroom, and your mother won’t be taking your temperature every hour.”

“She doesn’t do that anymore,” I told her almost-sharply.

“Uh huh.” Aveline wasn’t at all put off by my tone. “Besides-I miss you and this house is too big for *just* me.”

There was no reason not to, I reasoned. I had all of my things with me in my SUV, and it wasn’t like I had anything promised in Ohio. I did have some money, enough to get a bed at least, and I’d always wanted to come down here to see Aveline and the city itself.

“Can we get a cat?” I asked, only half joking.

Aveline shrugged. “Fine with me. So long as we can go get one from the humane society.” Glancing over at me, she tried to fight the smile spreading across her face. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

“*Only* because your tits look *so good* in pasties,” I replied sweetly. “And because you’re my favorite cousin.”

She cackled, not needing to point out that she was my *only* cousin. “Come on, let’s get online and find shit for your room.”

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CHAPTER 5

"Mom-stop. *Stop!"* My words finally broke through my mother's monologue, and I heard her huff in irritation. "It's fine. *I'm* fine."

"*And what if you're not?"* She snapped. "*You haven't even looked at switching your prescriptions or finding a new doctor back in Ohio. Who's going to make you get it done? Aveline*?"

Being that she was on speaker, my mother's voice was audible to my cousin, who rolled her eyes but did not look up from her ipad.

"I don't need her to tell me what to do. I'm twenty-four and I will be *fine.*" When she didn't speak, I hurried on. "I've been living on my own for three years at the university-"

"-*With your doctor close by and me to remind you to pick things up*," Mom broke in. "*I don't think this is a good idea. You don't even know if you'll be able to find a job, or if you'll be able to live with your cousin. I'd much prefer it if you came home and researched this instead of making a spontaneous decision.*"

"I don't want to do that. I have enough money saved to take care of myself for a couple of months, and Aveline is helping me with the job situation. This will be fine."

"*And what happens if you get sick? Is Aveline going to take you to the emergency room? Or will she be out partying with her friends?"*

"I'll take you to the *witch doctors* out in the bayou," Aveline mumbled from the couch. "Tell her we've already ordered and bought your furniture, so you can't go to her house."

“I’ll be fine,” I repeated, placating. “If something happens and I can’t do it, then I’ll come home.” It was a good thing she couldn’t see me blatantly crossing my fingers.

My mother hesitated, though I could tell she was considering it. “*If you think this is what’s best, then fine. You’re an adult*.” Her reply was tired. She didn’t like arguing either. “*I’m not trying to keep you prisoner here. I just worry. You’ve had a hard time with your health, Georgette.”* My mother was always the first to call me by my real name, and the last to consider using *George.*

“So...” I drew the word out hopefully.

“*You can stay, I suppose. I’ll put some money in your account so you can get whatever you need.”*

My heart jumped. “What-mom you don’t have to do that! I deposited my graduation money from Helene and Ismael-I’m really okay-“

“I’m already doing it. Get some nice furniture for your room. Get a bedframe for once.” She was slowly beginning to sound like her usual, unstressed self again. “*Just promise me you’ll be careful and that you’ll call me if you need me.”*

“I promise.”

“*I love you.*”

“Love you too, Mom.”

“*Tell Aveline I said hi.”*

“Will do. Talk to you later.” I hung up and looked to my cousin, who was finally looking up at me. “Mom says hi,” I told her, as if she didn’t hear.

“I thought she’d be more upset,” my cousin admitted. “Like-threaten to come down here and *drag you home.* I had an argument prepared.”

“I did too. But maybe she has more faith in me than I thought?”

“Or me. I’m a really good cousin.”

“She thinks you’re going to leave me passed out on a sofa and not get me help.”

Aveline paused, her eyes finding mine and making me falter as well. “Do you get sick anymore? Like that?”

“Not really. Getting sick still sucks.” I busied myself folding a pair of jeans and handed them off. “Colds are a bit worse than what other people get. I tend to take longer to recover, but that’s all. I haven’t had to go to the emergency room in three years now.”

“Should we have some kind of protocol? Like-for if I should know to take you to a hospital or a witch doctor or high priestess?”

“Okay well first off, an emergency room will do. I am *not* letting a witch doctor poke and prod at me.” I shook my head, shaking the jeans in my hand.

She took them. “You allergic to anything? Anything special I should tell them?”

“No. I keep medical information in my email. I umm-“ I felt *awkward* having to discuss this. “I’ll send stuff to you that you can just show them. But it’s fine. I mean it; I don’t get sick like that anymore. By the way,” I checked my phone. “ It’s seven. What are we doing tonight? I was kind of thinking we should maybe talk about what happened last night at the swamp. There were a lot of threats being thrown around that I didn’t enjoy.”

“We~ell.” Aveline’s voice turned coy. “I *had* an idea. Since your mom said yes and all, we should celebrate you being here. Don’t you agree?”

“Does that mean more takeout *while* we talk about last night?

She shook her head. “That means we go out, find really *really* sexy men and women to help you celebrate moving here. Who better to party with than strangers and bar company? *Or* those men from last night. Don’t think I didn’t notice. And *then* we can come home and talk about last night.”

“Oh.” I rubbed my nose thoughtfully. “I didn’t know you were into bars. Thought you just liked your goth-fetish-clubs. And I doubt we’ll be seeing them around. He’s the vampire *King* now. Plus, Av, I’m not sure if you’re taking this seriously.” She never took anything seriously until it bit her on the ass.

“All right. Fair point, I suppose. We won’t go searching for your new friends. Even though, if I am completely honest, *they* would be really great guests to your welcome-to-New-Orleans party. We’ll just go to *Euphoric.”*

“I’ve never been to a burlesque club,” I admitted finally, accepting defeat but promising myself that we would talk after the bar.

“It’s not *just* a burlesque club. It’s a gothic-light kink-burlesque-club-bar,” Aveline corrected.

“*My bad*, then.”

“*And* you kind of have. Remember when we were twenty-one and I found that place in Tennessee that you drove us to?”

My eyes narrowed. “Yeah. I remember you getting into a bar fight with a werewolf, too.”

She smiled, reminiscing. “Goddess that was a good time. Anyway- *Euphoric* isn’t like that. And I know a lot of the people who go. It’ll be fun.”

“Do I have anything to wear?”

My cousin threw a thoughtful look to my closet, eyes narrowing. “No. Not at all. But I do, and we’re about the same size, right? We’re both twelves?”

“We are,” my eyes narrowed. “I’m not wearing pasties.”

With a swipe of her hand, a breeze pushed me out of the room and Aveline followed. “Go shower and put on your makeup. Which I *will* be adjusting if I don’t approve. Lots of eyeliner. Dark lipstick. Think *witch of the night*.”

“Like Morticia Addams?” I asked helpfully, already going to the bathroom down the hall.

“Less undead, more sexy,” Aveline corrected as I closed the door behind me.

Euphoric, as it turned out, catered to the preternatural community over the human one. Not that humans weren’t welcome, Aveline assured me. It was common for them to come see what all the fuss was about and get a dose of kinky-preternatural-reality while they were at the club.

But it was definitely more of a popular place for the light preternatural kink scene of New Orleans.

The entrance was tucked away slightly, and looked more like the shaded entry of a nice restaurant instead of a night club. Past the blacked out doors, Aveline led the way down an enclosed hallway decorated with sconces and benches. A few people dressed much like us sat out here, but my cousin didn’t pause.

The man at the second set of doors nodded to her and smiled. “Didn’t think you were working tonight, Ave.” The man flashed a grin in her direction.

Aveline’s lips quirked up at the corners mischievously as she answered. “I’m not. Wanted to bring my cousin here since she’s new in town. George, this is River,” she gestured to him and he nodded.

“Good to meet you, George.” He didn’t question my name; I liked him already. “You aren’t the only fresh blood here tonight. Some pretty important VIPS are on the second floor.”

“Oh?” Aveline’s brows raised. “With anyone or entertaining themselves?”

“Themselves mostly. Though I think Ravenna has got their attention. They’re not new to the scene, unless I’m mistaken.”

“We’ll have to check it out.” Aveline beckoned me forward and River opened the door. “Take care, River.”

“You two as well. Hope you enjoy Euphoric, George.”

“Thank you.” I met his smile with one of my own and we stepped into the club as he let the doors close behind us.

Music hit me first. Loud and sensual; it wasn’t what I’d been expecting.

From where we stood at the entryway, I was only slightly surprised to see a man and woman so openly flaunting their shifter features proudly. They stood behind a long, marble topped counter and I could easily see the feline ears and slitted eyes in the party lighting.

For the first time in a while, I considered doing the same. No one knew here, and so what if they did? I wasn’t a kid anymore. I was old enough to not care what people thought of me.

“I’ll get us in for free. You thinking of letting loose?” Aveline’s eyes followed the trail of where mine were fixed. “Go on and do it. Not like anyone is going to judge you. Even if we tell them you’re my cousin, lots of families are mixed, you know that.”

I hesitated, considering, then smoothed my hands over my hair and felt my magic tingle against my scalp. My white ears sprang up, parting my hair, and I adjusted my shorts so that my tail could easily curve over them. Aveline helped, using the garter belt to frame in just my tail so I wasn’t showing everyone more than I wanted.

“Hey Aveline!” the woman at the reception counter leaned over it languidly. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is my cousin George. She just moved here. Thought she’d like the club.”

Aveline slid her arms along the surface of the counter, leaning her weight on it. I took that moment to look around, noting that this place was amazing. And intimidating. Thankfully my all-black outfit really fit in,

making me not as self-conscious about it as I had been before we'd left Aveline's house.

Well, my house too, I supposed.

"Picked a good night for it; we aren't too crowded. I like the atmosphere tonight," the man commented, turning to me. "I'm Felix."

"Felicity," the woman added.

"George, like she said," I greeted. "This place is way different than I was expecting."

"River said there's a VIP group here?" Aveline repeated curiously.

Both feline shifters nodded. "Some new guy and his friends. They're up in the lounge." Felicity's eyebrows wiggled. "Maybe I'll go see them when I'm done here."

"The lounge?" I was confused as to what the fuss was about.

"You into the kink lifestyle, George?" Felix asked daintily. "Like Avi here?"

"No one can be into this lifestyle more than my cousin," I answered soberly, making him laugh. The truth was, I didn't know much about it, but I didn't want to say that to Aveline's friends.

"True. We have a light bondage area upstairs. It's nothing big; mostly just for show. Some fuzzy manacles, a couple of light toys. It's for people who either don't feel like going to another place, or those who are too *scared*." He gazed at Felicity thoughtfully. "Definitely don't think our VIPS tonight are too scared."

"I'm going to show George around." Aveline had finished talking to Felicia. "See you guys later."

"Later," Felicia agreed as Felix waved.

Aveline looped her arm with mine and we walked out of the entry area. I had to focus on stepping *down* onto the sunken dance floor, trying not to trip even in the low heels. I was much more used to wearing tennis shoes and sweatpants in college about ninety-percent of the time. One could say I was out of practice with heels.

I saw that most of the other patrons were dressed much like us, or in even less. Some women wore only bras, others in bikini tops, and most of the men were in leather, fishnet, or a combination thereof.

"Is there a dress code to come in here?" I asked, still walking beside Aveline.

“Absolutely. You don’t have to wear black, but you can’t come in here wearing just jeans and a raggedy t-shirt. We’re not like that.”

“I bet you get a lot of human tourists who try, am I right?”

She nodded. “All the time. That’s why River’s at the door; you don’t follow the dress code, you don’t make it past him.”

“How serious of you guys.”

Two bars sat at either side of the entrance, and in front of us the floor was interspaced with small tables that faced a theatrical stage complete with red spot lights.

“Is that where you perform?” I asked, my eyes locked on a woman slowly shimmying out of a corset.

“Four nights a week,” Aveline confirmed. “You’ll have to come see me and be my biggest fan. Cheer for me, bring me flowers. You know.”

“No. If that’s okay-no. I love you and I’m sure you look great in, well, almost *nothing*, but I am not watching you, my cousin, dance.” I looked at her, one ear tilted back, and she laughed.

“I’m *joking*. Come on.” She showed me the lower lounge, which she informed me was for the regular, unimportant guests, and got us both nonalcoholic drinks.

I cracked the tab on my vanilla coke, the spritz soda cold compared to how heated I felt just being here. We sat down at a table just off the stage and I certainly didn’t mind; I’d looked up burlesque on the internet when Aveline had gotten interested in it, but I hadn’t seen a *live* show.

And while I had no intention of watching my cousin do this-that seemed weird, though I was sure she was great at her job-I was shook.

The woman on stage had bright pink hair and fluffy cat ears sitting primly in her white-blonde heir. Her tail was incredibly fluffy as well, and the end of it had been dyed pink. She danced to a sweet, lyrical song and made eye contact with the crowd liberally as she strutted across the stage, slowly teased her undressing, and generally made everyone in the audience envious. Including me. *Definitely* me.

Aveline clapped at all the appropriate times, a grin on her face, but I could only sit there, mouth open like an idiot as my stomach twisted in anticipation.

Aveline took one look at my face and didn’t bother hiding her wide grin.

When the song ended, another employee dressed in black collected the shifter’s clothes and followed her off stage. The audience clapped, none

louder than Aveline, and the stage lights dimmed.

"*We will be taking a ten-minute break,*" a silky voice announced. "*Please enjoy your time at Euphoric.*" Her voice faded as heavier music took over, and Aveline stood.

"She's good, right?" my cousin asked, elbowing me lightly.

"She's…*really* good," I agreed. "Are you friends?"

"Somewhat," she shrugged. "I don't dislike her. You want to see the second floor lounge now? I really want to see who these VIPs are that everyone is talking about."

"You know-this is significantly less alcoholic than I had anticipated," I told her, fixing my shirt as I stood.

"It'll get there. We'll corral some people and make them buy us drinks." I didn't doubt her ability to do so, frankly. "It'll be fantastic. But first!" she made shooing motions at me. "Second floor!"

"Okay *okay.*" I held my hands up in surrender, walking with her to a large, gilded staircase that hugged the wall.

She pulled me away from the staircase and we leaned against the half-wall that looked down onto the floor and stage below.

"Everyone's allowed to go to our little play stage over there, but only VIPs can use the bar," Aveline explained as I looked around at the dark and gothic styled floor. The whole club had a crimson-and-black motif going that I didn't hate, and this floor was no exception. My heels sank into plush crimson carpeting, and the only real light came from chandeliers above us.

"The *good* bar," Aveline gestured to the area in front of us where a large mahogany bar sat. The two men behind it were dressed in old-style white shirts and pants, their mustaches *curled*, and I caught a glimpse of jewel-like eyes in the darkness.

"Come on." We linked arms once more, walking around the balcony. "Private booths there." She nodded her head towards booths that were hard to make out from here.

"And finally. The VIP lounge and our little *kink den.*" She threw me a look as we rounded the last corner and came upon where most of the floor space was on this level.

The floor transitioned to hardwood, the shining brown almost black in the dark, and the area was set back from the wraparound of the balcony, only visible once you were this close.

Leather sofas and an honest *throne* sat against the walls, while the floor in front of them was empty, save for two thin tables holding an array of toys and leather manacles dangling from the ceiling. One small chandelier cast the most light, but a few lamps hung on the walls.

There were only a few people on this side of the second floor, and my eyes first caught a couple curled up on the throne, both of them vampires. The two women were wrapped around each other, nearly nude, and gazed out at the lone man prowling about a woman smiling with her hands cuffed to the ceiling.

My eyes followed theirs, and I froze.

"*Umm.*" My night vision was fantastic, and certain features were hard to forget.

Aveline looked at me, confused. "Too much?" she was worried, obviously, and stepped back to stand beside me. "I didn't know-I thought-"

"It's not that," I interrupted. "You don't recognize him? And…" Sure enough, the two other men on one of the plush sofas were *just as recognizable.* "And them?"

Aveline looked them over, eyebrows knit in confusion. "Are they the men from last night?"

"Yeah. They were at the cemetery. That's the *vampire* who I went with to get you back! He's-Aveline he's the *king* of the New Orleans *clade,* remember?"

"Oh." It did not inspire the kind of surprise or fear or shock that I had expected. She settled back on her stiletto heels with a click. "Sweet. Let's go say hi, yeah? I bet they'll buy you a drink."

"*What*? No-this seems like a shitty idea." I grabbed for Aveline but she grinned, turned her grip on me, and used it to drag me into the lounge.

We skirted the 'fun zone' and walked around to the sofa, where Aveline cleared her throat and waited impatiently for Cian and Indra to look up at us.

The vampire *king* was smiling at Indra the entire time, and I had every notion that he knew we were here and who we were. Indra, seated in his lap, looked up at me with a sweet smile that changed to one of surprise at my shifter features.

Shit.

"I thought you were a witch. You *are* a witch," he corrected himself, shifting to look at us more clearly.

“She’s a hybrid,” Cian finally looked up at us. “I told you I sensed something more to her, didn’t I?” He looked to my cousin with his winning grin. “Good to see you’re looking better than you were.”

Her grin was just as bright as his. “Thanks to you and George,” she replied. “We were celebrating, actually. Turns out George is staying in New Orleans. She tells me you might be as well.” One hand on her hip and the other firmly gripping my wrist, she glanced down at the sofa. “Can we sit with you?”

“Depends.” Cian’s gaze switched to mine. “Is your cousin going to keep breathing if you do?”

“Oh she’s fine.” She sat down suddenly, manhandling me into doing the same, and dragged me forward so I was in the huddle. “I’m Aveline.”

“Cian. This is Indra.” He ran his fingers affectionately through the hellhound’s hair, over both his ears, and pulled him more comfortably back against his chest. “Akiva’s busy, but he’ll be thrilled to meet you.”

“Really?” I couldn’t help myself. “He wasn’t so thrilled to meet *me*.”

“Well, you called him a zombie,” Cian pointed out patiently.

I switched my gaze to where Akiva stood and saw that he had unbuckled the woman’s hands from her manacles. She was walking away, not looking at all put out, and Akiva fixed us with a mildly surprised glance.

“I told you I saw her down there,” he stated, walking over to us, perching on the arm of the sofa and looking at Aveline. “You’re the cousin.”

“Aveline.”

He *smiled* at her and it was nothing close to the *leer* he’d given me. “I’m glad George got you back in one piece. Did I hear you say you’re *staying*?” Just like that, he was speaking to me.

“I am. I’m living with Avi. Guess you guys are staying too, since you’re *king of the castle* and all that.”

We still hadn’t had anything to drink, and I was surprised to see that Aveline was still so unattached. Normally she had a radar for picking up men that helped her get laid very quickly.

“You look uncomfortable,” Akiva observed, eyes on mine. “I think you don’t belong here, unlike your cousin. Does it make you uncomfortable?” His grin turned to a *fucking smirk* that he seemed to save for me. “Perhaps that is why you didn’t come over here while I was playing.”

“This doesn’t bother me,” I snapped in response. “Quite the opposite.” Perhaps not entirely true-I hadn’t been around it, truly-but I wasn’t going to

say that to *him.*

The lich's grin grew. "Would you like to play with me? I'll let you strap my wrists in over there and we can discuss how you feel about the way I speak to you."

"I…" I cast a glance to the middle of the room. "I'm not-"

"Or would you prefer that *I* am the one handcuffing *you*?"

"I would think you wouldn't be handcuffing strangers and playing with them," I replied, working towards my title as *master of misdirection*. "Don't your boyfriends get jealous?"

Aveline situated herself back on the sofa, looking more amused than anything, and did not help.

"They would enjoy the show, either way," His one-shouldered shrug was smooth. "For all that this isn't quite true to our lifestyle," Akiva said.

"We were going to head out soon," Cian agreed. "We were recommended *Euphoric* by a few of the clade," he nodded to the vampires snuggling on the throne, "But this is a bit tame for us. Though we'll have to come back for the burlesque."

Oh. While I might snip at Akiva, having seen them here wasn't unpleasant, and I was interested at the thought of getting to spend some time with them in a less hostile setting.

Still it was most likely for the best. If they were really as experienced as it seemed, I'd most likely embarrass myself in front of them.

"Sorry," Aveline laughed. "We try here, but you can't really operate a bar *and* a fetish club, you know? The drinking, the photos, and all that."

"You work here?" Indra turned his red gaze to hers.

"I dance here," my cousin answered.

"Probably convenient for you, George," Akiva drawled. "I'm not sure you'd make it if I asked you to play with me."

"Convenient for *you*, you mean," I shot back. "Only think how embarrassed you'd be when I *did*." It was safe to banter like that; they were leaving, we were staying.

"Oh, my bad." His grin widened like that had been the answer he'd wanted. "Then by all means-why don't you come with us to our other destination?"

What?

My own grin faltered and Cian glanced between us.

On the other hand, my cousin had sat up and looked intrigued.

“We can’t,” I laughed, staying confident. “Aveline made plans for us to celebrate here-“

“No I didn’t. Are you guys headed to *Portal*, by chance?”

Now it was Akiva’s turn to look surprised. “You know of it.” He looked at me again. “And you don’t.”

“I’ve been. No complaints here, if George is down to get her kink on, I *more* than support it. And I have friends at Portal.”

“Oh…really?” I tried to convey my discomfort while maintaining my smile and wide, friendly eyes. “I don’t want to *put you out*, Aveline,” I said to her through gritted teeth.

She turned on me slowly. “I always say you should broaden your horizons,” she said savagely.

“If you feel pressured, you shouldn’t go,” Cian put in. “That’s not the right reason to.”

I looked at him, catching Akiva’s confident, snarky grin as I did. *Pressured* was not the right word.

“If Aveline wants to go and you guys are inviting us, why wouldn’t I want to go?” I asked. “But if we’re imposing-“

“You aren’t,” Indra sat up. “We’d like for you to come. You don’t even have to take Akiva up on his uh, little game he’s trying to play with you.” The shifter smiled, but it was much less arrogant and not-at-all menacing.

Fuck.

“I drove, so we’ll follow you, if that’s all right?” Aveline was saying, looking to Cian.

“More than fine with me,” the vampire *king* replied as he stood and stretched. “You know the way, I take it?”

Aveline was already nodding. “I do. We’ll see you there, then. I need to hit the restroom first.” She turned, dragging me off with her.

“Cute tail,” Akiva murmured as I went, his fingers brushing the sensitive white fur and earning him a scowl from me that only made him smirk.

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CHAPTER 6

"Don't worry," Aveline said, throwing her blue Elantra into park against the curb. "They are all yours, George. I'm not even remotely interested."

"And what makes you so confident I am?" I replied tersely, turning my glare on her. I was. I absolutely was, but not at the expense of my pride.

She looked at me blankly before answering. "Because you almost drooled on their shoes?"

"I did not!" Cian's Jaguar was in front of us, and with as much time as Aveline had taken in the bathroom I had no doubt they'd been here for at least ten minutes.

"So can I leave you with them? I love you and all but I really don't want to see you play with them. Besides, I texted this guy and he's here tonight, so I'd rather hang out with him if you don't mind." At my look, she amended her words. "Okay. I'll stay with you for a bit, make sure it works out, *then* go grab my boy." When I continued to look at her, she shook her head. "That's as much as you're getting. You can signal me or something if you need me, but I plan to be extremely busy."

"This was such a bad idea," I moaned, throwing my head back against my seat. "I should've come clean; I should've fessed up at *Euphoric*."

"Well. Yeah," Aveline agreed. "But you didn't, and I kinda think you want to be here. So we're here. When was the last time you got laid, again? Actually, scratch that. When was the last time you got *handcuffed, spanked, and sexed up* while your tail was out?"

I didn't reply; I didn't have to.

“Exactly. *Never.* So you are going to get out of this car and enjoy yourself. Or try, anyway. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll go home and drink; I have vodka and a lot of vanilla coke. I’ll even leave my friend for you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“And everything will be okay?”

Having grown up with me, she knew all the tells of my anxiety and how to deal with them. “Everything is fine. I swear on the goddess’s perfect tits.”

“Thanks Av.”

“Anytime. Now get your wolfy ass out of my car because that is all the pep talk I’ve got and I want to *go in."*

Portal was nothing like *Euphoric.* The main entry was professional, spotless, and well lit. A woman sat at a marble desk, smiling, and looked up at us as we came in. “Welcome to Portal,” she greeted. “If you’ll check your personal bags with her?” she gestured to a woman standing outside of an open coat closet.

Wordlessly I handed her my bag. Aveline had informed me that phones weren’t allowed to be used and to put mine in my pocket if I wanted to take it in. The rest of our stuff was in my bag that was given to the woman in exchange for a ticket that Aveline shoved into her pocket.

“Please don’t lose that,” I said, eyeing her shorts dubiously.

She grinned and slapped her back pocket.

“Are you with Cian Branwen?” the woman at the desk asked. “He said he was bringing guests and he’s paid your entry fee.”

My eyebrows raised.

“We are,” Aveline supplied, smiling.

“Do you both know the rules of *Portal*?” the woman went on.

I shook my head while Aveline nodded.

“No drinking, no drugs. No phones to be used except for here or on our balcony lounge. No photos. While you are welcome and encouraged to have your own safe words, we operate on a traffic light system. Green for go, yellow for pause, and red for total stop. If any of our monitors hear ‘red’ they will stop a scene immediately. If you make a mess, you clean it up after your scene. As we cater to preternaturals, we are more liberal with what we allow, but we will make a judgment call if a scene is deemed unsafe.”

It was much the same as the club we'd gone to in Tennessee, save that this place was mostly for our kind.

"You'll need to pick a bracelet and wear it while you're here." She gestured to a basket in front of her.

Aveline plucked a crimson, rubber bracelet from the basket, then turned to me.

I stepped closer, looking at the bracelets in the basket. They were cheap rubber, much like the kind fundraisers and festivals handed out, and came in three colors: neon blue, fluorescent green, and crimson.

The sign said that crimson was for dominants, blue for submissives, and green for those who were unsure or new.

Reluctantly I pulled a green bracelet from the basket.

"If you're ready, you can go on in," the receptionist told us. "Please enjoy yourselves!"

Aveline *dragged* me through the doorway, leading us down a short hallway and into a large, open room.

It was dim, as expected, and had a distinct Greek influence. The floor was dark marble, and here there were no fluffy manacles or toy paddles on tables.

Two crosses sat against the far wall, a bench between them, and closer to us were two tables.

One of the crosses had a woman bound on it while another woman stroked down her bare skin with a riding crop.

Perhaps not my thing, though I did not begrudge the women for it.

"Maybe they're busy," I mumbled. "Maybe they didn't wait for us and they're in their own *scene*."

"Don't count on it." It was *impossible* to miss Akiva's voice. "Can I touch you? PG only, I pinky promise."

I didn't turn. "Yes," I said after a moment, and Akiva slid his arms over my shoulders to wrap loosely around them.

"I was betting you wouldn't come," he admitted. "But you did." His hand found my wrist and held my hand up to look at my bracelet. "Though I did guess right on this." He wore a crimson bracelet like Aveline.

"So you're good then?" Aveline was smiling.

"What?" my eyes snapped back to hers.

"I told you I'd stick around to see if you were good. That's my friend over there," she gestured to a clump of people and I saw a younger man

beckoning her towards the hallway. “So if you’re good…and honestly, it looks like you are, I’m going to go.”

“I’ll take care of your cousin,” Akiva promised. “*Promise*.”

Aveline turned her savage grin on him. “If I hear her call out ‘red,’ I’m coming over. Trust me; I’ll hear, and you won’t like it.”

Akiva saluted her. “She won’t,” he promised.

Both of us waved goodbye as she strode away, hips swaying and boots clicking on the hard floor.

“She’s kind of terrifying,” Akiva admitted.

“Yeah, she wouldn’t have gone with you last night if our roles had been reversed,” I promised. “She would’ve blown the cemetery apart around the witches.”

His hand slid down my arm and he took my hand, pulling me around to an alcove where Cian and Indra were.

This time Indra was on the floor, chin on Cian’s knee while the vampire murmured to him and stroked his ears.

Cian glanced up, though he wasn’t surprised. “I told him you’d come,” he said as Akiva pulled me down to the sofa with them. His eyes fell on my bracelet. “Thought you’d have a blue one on, though.”

My ears flicked, flattening slightly. “Aveline has a red on,” I argued, though I wasn’t sure what that proved.

“I didn’t say anything about Aveline’s. And she strikes me as the dominant type,” Cian said, though his tone wasn’t argumentative. His own bracelet was red-not shocking-and Indra’s was blue.

“Maybe I am too,” I challenged.

“Oh very,” Akiva agreed mockingly. “Only…” he pulled my tail onto his lap, stroking the soft, white fur.

I tried-and-failed to conceal my moan and leaned back into him, stomach tightening at his touch.

“Only you’re kind of not, hmm?” He continued stroking over my tail. “They wouldn’t let me have both blue and red,” he told me absently. “And I figured since you were coming I would be *dominant* tonight.”

He was a switch, then?

“Why come here?” I found myself asking. “You could do *this* at Euphoric, right?”

“This, yes,” Cian agreed. “Mostly. They might not like what we do here soon, though.” His eyes gleamed wickedly. “Did Akiva tell you he lost his

bet?” His voice turned seductive.

Akiva didn’t pause his stroking of my tail, and I found it hard to think. It was a pretty well-kept secret that a shape shifter’s tail was a sensitive and erogenous spot for most of us, but I supposed with Indra around, they were more than slightly aware of that fact.

“He did,” I answered slowly, my tail twitching in the lich’s lap.

“I told him if you showed up then he’d have to apologize to you on his knees. Would you like him to?”

Indra smirked at Akiva, though hid the look from Cian.

“Are we talking like-apology or *apology*?” I asked nervously, unsure of what I was even implying.

Akiva snorted. “Do you want my apology, or do you not?”

“Yeah. Yes-you can *absolutely* apologize to me,” I told him, tipping my chin upward to meet his eyes with my own glowing gaze.

He didn’t look at all put out-did I expect him to?-and only slid to his leather-clad knees on the hard marble.

“I’m sorry,” he told me, hands encircling my ankles. His eyes blazed brightly as he lifted my leg to kiss the inner ankle of my boot. “I thought you wouldn’t come; you did.” He worked his way up, mouthing at the lining of my boot. I couldn’t pull away. I didn’t even *want* to, truth be told.

I was suddenly very aware that I wore only semi-thin thigh highs and not pants.

Sure enough, I could feel how warm his mouth was on my leg as he pressed his lips to the spot over my boot. I very suddenly thought of all the other places I would like him to put his mouth.

“I apologize,” he said again, moving to do the same to my other ankle. “Perhaps I’ll make it up to you. Would you like to see Cian *make* me apologize?” his eyes sparkled.

I had no idea how to respond.

He knew it and his smile grew. “Or would that be too much-“

“-Yeah,” I said suddenly, surprising us both.

He paused. Cian looked over.

“What?” Akiva asked after our silence.

“Well-you asked if I wanted to see Cian…*make you*.” I was tired of letting him one-up me by making me unsure. “I said yes, I would like to see that.” My eyes went to Cian. “If he wants to.”

“I’d love to,” Cian promised. He helped Indra off his knees and the shape shifter sat down next to me. Then the vampire went to Akiva and *yanked* him to his feet much less sweetly.

“So…you’re all together,” I murmured to Indra as he sat down next to me and unexpectedly laid his head on my lap.

“Yes,” he told me, smiling serenely upwards as I reached down.

“Can I…?”

Without answering, he reached up and brought my hand to his ears.

They were coarser than mine, the fur stiffer, and reminded me of a german shepherd’s fur.

“Have you ever done this before?” he inquired, watching with me as Cian helped Akiva out of his shirt and harshly tied his hands together in front of him.

“Watched a lich get dominated by a vampire?” I quipped.

Indra smiled. “Indulged in the lifestyle.”

“No,” I admitted after a pause. “Aveline and I got into a club kind of like this once, a few years ago. It was her kink-awakening, I think. But I was living in a dorm, and the area was pretty conservative.”

“Do you think you like it?”

I considered that. “Yes,” I said finally, nodding at Cian. “What’s he going to do?”

Indra looked them over. “Bite him,” he said finally. “You’ll see.”

Honestly I wasn’t too sure how that was a punishment, since I’d seen how much the lich enjoyed being bitten the night before. But I didn’t say anything.

“Say you’re sorry,” Cian murmured, his face against Akiva’s neck. His hand cupped Akiva’s jaw sweetly and his bright eyes held mine. “Look her in the eye and apologize for how you’ve treated her.”

Akiva met my gaze, eyes shrewd. “No,” he told Cian, enjoying the word coming out of his mouth. Now they were both looking at me and I couldn’t help pressing my thighs together at the sudden surge of heat that went through me.

“Pity.” Cian smiled like he wasn’t surprised and trailed his lips over Akiva’s throat. Then he struck, and Akiva nearly fell to the ground as he cried out, knees buckling.

“He isn’t numbing the bite,” Indra explained. “It feels good, but it hurts when he does that.” His hand stroked over my tail and I was hyper aware of

his touch as I watched.

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to *say.* Cian did it again, whispering for Akiva to apologize as he bit the lich’s throat, not drinking his blood, and only lightly swiped his tongue over the marks to keep them from healing.

“Don’t you want me to make it feel good?” Cian breathed, his hand sliding down the front of Akiva’s pants. “Don’t you want that, my love?” *I* wanted that, and I wasn’t even the one being bitten.

“Yes,” Akiva breathed, eyes clouded. “Yes-Cian-“ he tried to rock his hips into Cian’s hand but the vampire wouldn’t let him; instead he bit him again and Akiva cried out.

“Then just tell her you’re sorry.”

Akiva shook his head until Cian’s nails dug into his skin and his bite deepened. “*Fuck*-I’m sorry. I’m so *sorry* George-“ he met my gaze with wild eyes. “I won’t do it again. I should’ve known you’d come; should’ve known-“ he shook when Cian’s bite changed and smiled into it, eyes closing.

They sank down to the floor, Cian holding him tight as he finally gave him the kind of bite he wanted. I watched them, eyes wide, and my fingers clenched in Indra’s short hair as my body tingled.

Then, suddenly, he let go and pushed Akiva forward, nearly causing him to fall on his face.

“Tell her,” he ordered. “And make her believe it.” His voice was sharp as he quickly undid Akiva’s bound hands, letting the lich crawl to me and wrap his hands around my boot.

“Forgive me?” he asked, running his mouth over my calf and up to the inside of my knee. “Won’t you, George?” My muscles twitched under his hand and I barely registered the question.

“Without enjoying yourself,” Cian barked, still standing behind him.

Akiva dropped his eyes, then went back to pressing kisses to my boots.

“I forgive you,” I said, voice small and breathy.

Indra grinned and Akiva straightened, his own smile returning.

“You let him off too easy,” Cian didn’t sound angry, and sat down again to draw Indra back into his lap. “He’ll be back at it within the hour and next time *you* get to put him on the floor.” He raised his brows, meeting my eyes, then looked down at Indra.

If I asked nicely, would *Akiva* put me on the floor?

The term puppy love came to mind as I watched Indra gaze up at him.

Akiva's hands tightened slightly and he ran his hands up my calves, over my thigh highs, and finally came to play with the buckles of my garter belt.

"Heard you say you lived in a dorm until now," he mentioned, sitting in between my thighs and looking up at me. "How old are you?"

I hesitated. "Twenty-four." Already I was defensive. "I went late because I was *sick.* It's not like-"

"I care very little for human milestones," he said breezily. "I only asked your age, did I not?"

There it was again. The snark that apparently Cian could get him to let go of, but not me.

As if he knew what I was thinking, he smiled. "If you want me to talk nicer to you, then you'll have to *earn* it."

"Guess I'll have to study up," I responded with much more confidence than I felt.

His gaze darkened. "Lucky for me then, I don't need to study up. And I think I am much more convincing at having you on your knees than the other way around."

"Maybe," Cian mused. "I don't know, what are you into, George? I know you're new to this, but surely you have some *interests*, yes?"

Why yes, yes I did. Indra embodied a lot of those with the way he acted like a puppy with Cian. I wouldn't have minded being in Akiva's position either, with any of them being the ones to tie my hands and put me on the floor.

Truthfully, I would not have minded getting on my knees for Akiva in the slightest.

"What are *you* into?" I challenged Akiva. "Other than being bitten?"

Akiva shook his head. "That's not how this works. If you're going to *play with us* then you have to follow the rules. Cian asks, you answer. Unless you want to try putting him on his knees."

I looked at the smiling vampire, sizing him up.

Yeah, not in a million years.

"You're free to try," he offered. "Power struggles are absolutely my thing. But consider-if Akiva can make you submit, then you won't be knocking on my door anytime soon."

Curiously more than anything I looked down to Indra and a small smile curled over his full mouth. "You can try," he said. "I couldn't make either of

them submit either, so who knows? Maybe you're more of a *pack leader* than I am."

But still his amber eyes blazed and I was not so sure of that.

"Still haven't gotten an answer," Cian hummed.

"I have *interests*, sure," I agreed. I gestured to Indra. "That's looking pretty tempting, actually."

"Indra?"

"No-well yes-but I meant his current position."

I didn't know Akiva could move so quickly.

One moment I was on the sofa and the next I was inexplicably on the *floor*. Akiva tugged me forward, my body between his legs and my hands braced on his thighs.

I hadn't even needed to ask, and my body had no idea how to respond to the quick reversal.

"Is this okay?" he asked, pausing. "You know the traffic light system. Color?"

The moment of confusion passed. "Green," I whispered, making him grin once more. My tail curled behind me as Akiva stroked his hands over my ears and situated me more comfortably so I sat on my knees, head on his thigh.

"You want to be a good girl for me?" he whispered, rubbing my canine ears and running his fingers through my hair. "I knew it, with the way you acted when I stroked your tail."

Yes. Yes I *absolutely* wanted to be a good girl for him, and the way my body was reacting was proof of that. Heat pooled between my thighs and I leaned into Akiva, fingers gripping the rough denim of his jeans.

Indra looked at me, nostrils flared slightly and I had a good feeling that he could smell my arousal, much the same as I had been able to smell his all night.

Cian paused, hand going to his pocket. "I'll be right back," he said as he stood. "Phone call."

He left, and immediately Indra was behind me, one arm wrapped around my waist.

"No need for a safe word," he murmured. "Just say stop and I will."

"Okay." My voice was only slightly softer than his. Akiva didn't let me pull backward, and instead lifted my wrists and encircled them in his free hand while the other stroked over my ears still.

Then Indra was kissing my bare shoulder, mouth open and teeth scraping against my skin. His hand at my waist wasn't still, and my skin twitched when his hand lifted my shirt, palm warm against my breast.

I gasped, surprised, and Akiva took that moment to kiss me hard, teeth digging into my lower lip. Pain blossomed there, but it only served to make me want *more* of this. I pressed into Indra, hips tight against his.

I had a moment to consider that this was not how I thought my night would go, but then Indra was *growling* into my ear, the sound making me shiver. It was a much more dominant sound than I'd thought him capable of making, and he followed it up by nipping at the shell of my human ear, both hands lifting my shirt so Akiva could *watch* him palm my breasts, fingers finding my nipples and rolling them between his thumb and forefinger. I gasped, mouth falling open as I leaned back against his shoulder. I needed his hands somewhere *else*.

Indra's hands were just the right amount of rough, and he hissed quietly, though I wasn't paying enough attention to make out the words. It didn't bother me that he had my shirt up over my collarbone so Akiva could watch and appreciate-why should it?

The lich himself sat back, having released my hands so I could twine them around Indra's neck, brushing his ears as I stretched my arms upward. The hellhound situated me more comfortably on my knees, body pressed in a hard line behind mine, and when his hips slid against mine, I could feel how thrilled he was to be here.

Finally without a quip at his lips, Akiva only watched, one hand having unbuttoned the front of his very tight jeans. His eyes shone in the dark, lips parted as Indra's hand trailed down my stomach teasingly, finding the button of my shorts and causing me to gasp. There was no way Indra wasn't good with his hands, and he was so close-

"Akiva. Indra." Cian's voice was sharp and it felt like I'd been doused with ice water. Both men looked to be feeling the same, and Indra stood when he saw Cian's face.

"What's wrong?" the hellhound asked, stepping closer to him. Akiva stood as well, though had the grace to help me up as I fixed my shirt.

"We need to go. *Now.*" He looked at me, hesitating like he wanted to say something, then decided against it. "Give Akiva your number, if you like. We'll see you again if you're interested."

"I mean-I could be," I said breathily, and Akiva smirked.

“I’ll remember if you just tell me,” the lich promised.

I did so, and he recited it back to me perfectly before leaning forward and kissing my cheek. “Sorry to cut this short, George,” he called, already on his way out with the others.

I only stood there, confused. “It’s fine,” I said. Had I done something wrong? I hadn’t thought it seemed that way, but what did I know?

Shaking my head, I went to find Aveline so we could go home and find the vodka.

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CHAPTER 7

True to her word, Aveline had a lot of vodka and a lot of soda.

Upon seeing my face she'd immediately pulled away from her 'friend' and looked down the hallway as if I might be running from Cian or his lovers.

I'd told her tersely what had happened, and had offered to just wait for her, but to my surprise she'd told her friend that she had to leave and had immediately marched out the door with me.

Then we'd gone home, found the drinks, and gotten plastered.

It was lucky that she had discovered the secret to preventing hangovers by her twenty-second birthday, and luckier still that she had some of her 'cure' at all times in the back of the fridge. When I woke up, head pounding, Aveline had been there with a foul-tasting liquid and had ordered me in no uncertain terms to drink the whole damn thing.

"That's vile," I gagged, tossing the bottle into the sink and sticking my tongue out as if to air it off. My contacts were gritty and I needed to take them out, but that was so much work and I was in no mood to move more than I had to just yet.

"It's awful," Aveline agreed, moving around the kitchen smoothly and dragging out a bag of chips. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving," I admitted, checking my almost dead phone.

No calls from my new friends.

A groan escaped me and I plopped down in one of her kitchen chairs. "I've got to start getting up earlier if I'm going to find a job."

"You had an excuse." She sat down as well, sliding me a drink, and opened the bag. "No messages?" my cousin eyed my phone and I shook my

head.

“They’re probably not going to call,” I sighed. “Even if he remembered my number-which he didn’t-guess that was their polite way of ditching me.”

“Don’t mope. I’ll get you a date with someone from Euphoric,” Aveline replied. “The sex will be ten times better, I promise.”

“It’s not about the sex, Av,” I said. “It’s about *them*. They’re just so different than anyone we grew up with. Not immature like the people in college, either.”

“Right, well, that would make sense as they’re probably older than both of us put together,” she quipped, but didn’t comment on my statement.

I looked at her, sneer on my lips as my hangover started to ebb away. I didn’t want to argue. “What are you doing today?”

“I work tonight,” Aveline informed me, sitting back in her chair. “Which is so strange to me-after-“ She broke off and looked away, schooling her face into careful neutrality. “but rent waits for no witch.” Her sudden grin met my bewildered one. “What about you? If you like, you can come hang out.”

“Nah. That would make me feel weird.” From the other end of the table I looped a finger into the strap of my bag, inching it closer to me.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Walk around? Drive around? Learn more about the city than two clubs, a cemetery, and your house?” From my bag I pulled my contact case, switching them out for my glasses quickly.

That was so much better.

My hand bumped my deck, but instead of pushing it away, I pulled the cards from my bag.

Aveline looked up with interest. “You’re going to check the cards about last night,” she accused good naturedly.

“I don’t know.” Hesitantly I laid the cards between us, frowning. “Doesn’t that seem like cheating to you?”

“It’s the same as my hangover cure,” Aveline pointed out. “And I don’t see that as cheating. We’re simply using our natural-born talents to our advantage.” Her eyes were fixed on the cards as I spread them out over the table. “Plus I haven’t seen you do this in years.”

Deftly I tapped the cards, able to see traces of my own magic spark into the deck. Not that it was necessary; I’d had these cards for years and they

were saturated with my magic.

This deck was my favorite. They were a gift from my mother and I had no idea where she'd acquired them from. Most of the cards featured darker, more arcane images involving nature and animals, and all of their hand painted surfaces shimmered with iridescence that I was drawn to.

While I kept my other decks in a box in my room, this deck never went far from my person. My three Major Arcana of power were not in this apartment. Like all summoners, once the cards were bound to me they were a *part* of me that I could summon at will. If I died, they would become permanently corporeal once again. Otherwise, they remained a part of my magic.

"Okay," I sighed, hefting the cards and shuffling them. "Dear cards." It was absolutely unnecessary to *say* anything, but I was feeling unsure. "You know why we're here." It was as if they were my silent audience as I spread them over the table in an arc.

"So help me out." Quickly I drew one that caught my eye, brought it to me, and flipped it over.

The Ace of Cups glared at me from the table.

"Well that's not really surprising. And incredibly unhelpful," I groused. "In case you didn't know, Ave, I'm searching for *new relationships*."

She snorted, but didn't speak.

The second card I drew quickly as well, and flipped it over in front of me.

The three of Wands, only it was upside down to my eyes.

Now my eyebrows raised slightly and I studied the card, turning it first one way, then the other.

I hated reading for myself. It was always that much harder to find the answers, and I didn't always like what the cards shouted at me.

"Lack of foresight. Unexpected delays," Aveline said unhelpfully, citing the meaning of the card that I was touching. "Even I can guess what that means."

In conjecture with my *seeking new relationships* status as helpfully referenced by the Ace of Cups, it was all too obvious.

"Whatever." I searched the deck once more, spread out in front of me.

Nothing stood out.

My mouth turned down sharply and I brushed my fingers over my cards.

There-my hand tingled, then sparked, and I pulled away with a hiss.

“What’s wrong?” Aveline looked at my hand.

“Nothing-not really anything.” I pulled my hand back, rubbing it. Something had pushed back against my intent, as if the cards were offended.

Without thinking further, I grabbed a card and flipped it over in front of me, eyes narrowed.

The Tower. Sudden change. Upheaval.

Chaos.

Not what I was expecting for this reading.

“This doesn’t make sense.” The way the magic spoke, it was as if I had two fragments of different readings going on. I’d asked the cards for help with my love life, but the energy from the Tower couldn’t be any less chaotic.

Silently I swept the cards back into the deck, shuffling once more and laying them out in front of me face down.

A general reading, then I’d draw one card to see where that had me for today.

I flipped the card that stood out to me, pulling it down with a scowl.

The fucking *Tower.*

Reversed, I might have understood. That would have signaled personal growth for me, or aversion to change. But as it was, the lightning-struck tower on the black field stayed straight up, the birds falling to the ground glimmering faintly at me.

Almost absently I shuffled again, casting my mind around for something else; something to focus on.

The door. The world around me.

I drew a card.

The Tower.

“It’s creepy when you do that,” Aveline admitted. “Do you ever have your personal readings line up like this?”

“No,” I said slowly. “Not if I’m searching for different answers.”

Chaos was hardly an answer, after all.

“Can I try?”

I nodded, reshuffled, and spread the cards for Aveline.

When she slid a card to her, I half-expected it to be the Tower as well and my heart clenched.

But it wasn’t.

The Nine of Cups shimmered up at her and I sighed. That was easy.

“You will be content with your day,” I groused. “Congratulations. I bet that is really shocking for you and I hope you’ll be able to make the most from your reading.”

She smirked. “You’re just jealous because I’m uncomplicated.”

“Oh extremely.” I still had no answers on the three men from last night.

An idea struck me and I reshuffled, tapping the cards a bit more voraciously than necessary.

In my mind, I focused on the faces of Cian, blonde and red eyed with just the right amount of ruggedness; Indra, dark skinned and sweet; and Akiva, green eyed and oh so arrogant.

Without looking at my cards, I drew three unerringly and flipped them over in front of me.

Aveline was silent.

The Wheel of Fortune, reversed, sat at my left elbow.

The Lovers was upright in front of me.

Death sat at my right hand.

Death was not nearly so dramatic a card, on its own. It meant many things.

But I couldn’t see the *other things*.

Darkness seemed to swell around my cards and the way their magic interacted clashed and fought.

Reading fortunes was easy for a summoner, but it seemed to me like I was looking at my cards through a wave of static.

“That’s not for you, right?” Aveline asked uncertainly.

“No. I don’t think so.” I reached down to touch the antlered deer skull on the *Death* card. “It’s for them.”

While I had chaos in my readings, from daily to relationships, the three of them had the worst luck I’d seen in a reading in awhile.

“Maybe they’re going to get the little ‘c’,” Aveline shrugged after a moment.

I looked at her, confused. “Little ‘c’? Is that like the big ‘C?’”

Her grin grew. “No. It’s chlamydia from them standing you up and probably humping each other for the rest of the night like preternatural bunnies.”

I couldn’t help it, I snorted. The snort turned to laughter and my dread broke as I lifted my hand and magically drew all the cards back into my palm, bound them, and slid them back into my thigh bag.

“You’re so mean,” I told her finally, finishing off my drink.

“But also probably right. The cards are rarely as doom and gloom as mortals want to believe, you know?” she pointed out tactfully.

“For sure.” She was right, for the most part. I’d only read a few dark fortunes in my life, and things that looked dark normally turned out to be a mere hiccup in someone’s fortune.

Chaos, for me, was very likely to mean I might get lost in the French Quarter, should I stray so far.

“What are we having for lunch?” I wasn’t going to let these cards put me in an even worse mood. “Because your little miracle hangover cure has me *starving*.”

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CHAPTER 8

While we were no longer hungover, we still took the next few hours of opportunity to do nothing.

I was moping, predictably, and had no qualms with her suggestion of xbox and snacks.

Aveline offered me a controller, citing how cathartic it would feel to subvert the patriarchy by pissing off a few twelve-year-old future gamers, but I had declined. Normally, I would've accepted the invitation with relish, but not today.

"I'm *pouting*," I said for the sixth time. "I can't game with you when I'm in such emotional distress."

"They're not worth the distress," Aveline argued, standing and powering off the television and xbox both. "Nor this level of pouting. Save it for someone who's *worth* it. Goddess's tits, George. Go meet someone who's worth it."

"I'm going to go exploring," I shrugged. "It's almost like meeting someone, just without the actual meeting."

"Whatever." She went towards her room and I followed her down the hallway, seeing her duck into her 'home gym.'

"Do people ever ask you about this?" I asked, leaning against the doorway. The room wasn't a normal gym. An exercise ball sat in the corner, unused, while two metal poles gleamed at one side of the room, a hoop hung on the other.

Aveline had assured me that these were necessary; that an acrobatic burlesque dancer was very in demand and she'd used both in her dances.

As if to make a point, Aveline lunged onto one of the poles dramatically, tossing her hair as she spun once around the metal and stared at me from narrowed eyes.

“You’re the only one asking me about it.” She walked past me, smiling, and went to her room. “And you’re welcome to use the stripper poles. Wait for me on the hoop in case you fall-“

“-I’m not struggling my way up to a hula hoop,” I informed her dryly. “Just so you can watch me fall on my face.”

Aveline only smirked and disappeared into her room. I did the same, going to my own room and changing out of my sweatpants and tank into a pair of dark denim shorts and a black t shirt. The shirt itself was plain, save for large words emblazoned across the chest that read *Maybe today, Satan.*

I knew witches who wouldn’t joke about their craft or their beliefs. It was respectable, but I’d been raised to have a much looser view on things. My mother had taught me how to pay homage to our goddess, and I respected Her in all things magical, but I wasn’t going to walk around with charms drawn on my skin and with a crown of flowers.

It was a good look. Just not for me.

I was much better suited to my weird, possibly sacrilegious shirts and whatever else I could dig out of my closet.

Before leaving my room I changed into a pair of neon blue running shoes, and then met Aveline in the hallway.

She wasn’t kidding about going to work in jeans. She looked much like me, in a t-shirt and shorts, and tossed me a silver key from her hand. “Forgot to give you this. In case you get back before me. But you know. You don’t *have* to.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I’m not going to a club tonight. I’m exploring,” I reminded her.

“Whatever.”

Snagging my bag from the table, I strapped it around my waist instead of my thigh, glad I could wear it both ways, and walked with her to the front door so she could lock it instead of me.

if I was in charge of locking up and making sure everything was off, we’d be here all night.

“I’ll be done around three or so,” she told me as we walked to our cars. “Want me to text you?”

“Sure. I’ll probably be up. I’ll make use of the *witching hour* or something.” She grimaced at my smirk.

“You’re becoming so traditional.”

“*You’re* the one with all the plants in your house.”

“Whatever.” She stopped to yank her car door open and leaned on it. “Text me if you need anything. And good luck with whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Exploring,” I said again. “That thing we used to do before you got too old for it.”

I hated that she didn’t like to go on ‘night adventures’ anymore like I did unless they were to the nearest club. As teenagers we’d looked up haunted destinations within driving distance and begged, borrowed, or gotten a ride from our aunt Helene to go explore some backwoods cemetery or old, abandoned house.

Then she had gotten older, and declared our adventures were *childish.* I, for one, still loved looking for places to explore that held a creepy or mystical air to them.

Seemed like I was the only one.

Aveline had pulled out of the driveway by the time my rideshare arrived, and I took an extra second to adjust my glasses and make sure that I had everything.

Including an extra deck from the box at the foot of my bed and a few other assorted odds and ends that rattled around in my bag.

I opened the back-passenger door, thrilled to see no one else in the car as I got in and buckled up.

While I had my SUV, I hadn’t wanted to drive tonight. I still didn’t know my way around New Orleans, and I hadn’t wanted to mess with parking tonight either.

The driver, blessedly, said very little and no one else joined me for my ride. I stared out the window, trying to memorize the route for myself so that I *could* start driving more confidently around the city.

Finally he came to a stop and craned his head back, not looking particularly thrilled or otherwise. “Have a good night,” the dark skinned man said, meeting my eyes for the first time.

“You too.” I opened my own door, one foot on the pavement when he spoke again.

“Hope you can turn that fortune of yours around.”

I froze in place, blue eyes fixed on the sign for a nearby restaurant.

A band played from nearby, my own personal fanfare to get the fuck out, but I still didn't move.

When I looked back, the man's eyes had paled out to almost white, though I *swore* they'd been brown only minutes before. My heart seemed to skip a beat and I curled my hands into the leather of the seat.

"What did you say to me?" I demanded, my body wanting to *run* but the rest of me *needing* to know what the hell he knew about my fortune.

"Think ya heard me just fine, *cher*." His voice was lower than it had been, with a hint of something *different.*

"How do you know anything about my fortune?" I should've written it off as just being weird-people were weird, after all-but I couldn't.

Not with the way the dark skinned man looked at me and how his eyes were pale like frost.

"When you want yourself a real fortune, why don't you come visit us? *Maman Brigitte* would just love to get a look at you." He wasn't answering my questions, and spoke like he was simply holding a friendly conversation.

"Us?" I bristled, fighting the urge to shift or summon the Devil in his car. "I don't know who you are-"

"Laissez les bons temps rouler, cher." I didn't understand what he'd said and before I could ask, an invisible force *shoved* me out of the car and sent me stumbling onto the sidewalk.

The door slammed and the car peeled out of the spot, the man's eerie cackle seeming to echo on the street as my stomach clenched in fear.

"What the *hell?"* I had about a million questions, and absolutely no answers. Instead I was left standing on the sidewalk, flabbergasted, staring down the street where the man's car had sped away.

"You all right?" a woman stood near where I stumbled and looked at me, cloth in her hand from where she'd been wiping off the window in front of her. "Thought for sure you'd hit your face on the pavement when you got out."

When I'd *gotten out*? I'd been *pushed*. But I didn't say that. Instead I only nodded. "I'm fine. Just-tripped on the door or…something."

"Seemed to me like someone *helped* you trip." She went back to cleaning and I looked at her again, unsure.

Had she seen everything? Had she heard the driver's words? I almost asked, but instead thought better of it.

“I’m new here,” I said instead. “I actually came out to explore the city. Any recommendations?” My mouth curved into a nervously friendly smile, and I looked her over curiously while my hands twisted themselves in the fabric of my shirt. I wanted to ask if she’d seen what had just happened, but something gave me pause. What if that only led to more trouble?

“Depends on what you’re looking for. This is the human side of the quarter, though you’re pretty close to the line.” She gestured to her right. “A few more streets over and you’ll be in the old quarter. If you’ve come looking for the preternatural fuss, it’s all over there.”

I didn’t want to give her any concrete information, especially while I was still distracted. “Thank you!” But I supposed the preternatural side of the quarter was as good as any to explore.

While I walked, I went over the encounter in my head again until I’d convinced myself of what had actually happened; a creepy guy, possibly another witch or voodoo practitioner, had wanted to scare someone. It wasn’t hard to tell if someone was a witch, should you care to look, and obviously that was his *thing*. That or it was a fun trick to scare and delight the human tourists.

Not that voodoo priests were known to be tricksters. But everyone was different. It was *definitely* possible.

It was difficult to convince myself, but I worked very hard to do so.I didn’t want to know how he had any knowledge of my fortune, nor who he’d invited me to come see. The name *Maman Brigitte* was a glaring clue, but as preternaturals had become more popular, pretending to be people from legends or history books had become increasingly common.

I’d met six people promising to be descendants of Merlin himself, whom I doubted was even real, so why should I be surprised at a woman styling herself as the *Loa* queen?

That rationalization made the whole thing easier to brush from my mind, and when I looked up at the buildings around me, admiring the many hanging plants and street bands that played, I was able to actually focus instead of worry.

Anticipation rose in my stomach. No more stupid omens. No more stupid fortunes. The vampire’s threat of death still whispered at the edges of my mind, but I couldn’t just live my life like a shut while she hopefully just went away.

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CHAPTER 9

My *night adventure* lasted well into the darkness, up two streets, down an alley, and around the back of a voodoo shop.

After a moment's thought I ducked into the shop. It was *exactly* as I'd pictured it would be, with shrunken heads hung like wind chimes decorating the shop at eye level and bits of antique furniture scattered around. Fragrant candles made my eyes water, and in one particularly creaky rocking chair an old woman sat stroking a *gris-gris* made of what looked like feathers and a bird's foot.

I knew very little about voodoo myself, being a witch, but it didn't hurt to be curious.

"Are you lost?" A very dark skinned man boasting a heavy creole accent leaned across a counter, grinning.

"No. I'm just curious," I shrugged.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know," the man pointed out.

"And satisfaction brought her back," I retorted.

The old woman barked a laugh suddenly, making me jump. "Be that as it may…" She rose shakily from her chair, laying the *gris-gris* beside her. "I would think you'd be a lot happier visiting that woman's shop across the street. *Le Renard Qui Rit*, she's named it."

"Though if you're suddenly lookin' to switch your life around…" The man plucked a sachet from the counter and held it out to me. "You need only ask, *cher*."

"I'm not," I assured, not approaching him or the sachet. "Across the street, you said?"

The old woman lurched across the shop between us, glancing at me with disinterest before disappearing behind a beaded curtain.

"I'd go now," the man advised. "Before my mother comes back with all manner of little magics she thinks you need."

Taking his advice, I left the shop and strode directly across the street to where a sign hung over an open doorway, stenciled letters reading the shop's naming and featuring a laughing fox face underneath it.

A sign promised talismans, charms, potions, and ingredients made in-shop, and the smell of herbs drifted towards me on the light breeze.

Shops around New Orleans were open far later than I had expected them to be. But then again, this was the preternatural side of the quarter, and we *preternaturals* were known for being more active at night anyway.

The inside of the shop was traditional, though ornate. Products were separated onto a multitude of displays, and a small bookcase sat against one wall. Branches wrapped in faery lights hung suspended from the ceiling, providing most of the light and giving the small shop an atmospheric, moody feel.

Now the scent of herbs was stronger, as was the smell of old paper and *magic*.

Witches couldn't normally scent magic, and while I was far from a bloodhound, I could still smell the spicy-scent of power in the air when I visited the home of another witch or where they worked their magic.

Obviously whoever owned the shop really did make their charms here, otherwise I doubted I would have been able to smell any power at all.

"I wondered if you'd ever make your way here, sister."

The voice made me jump and I turned slightly, eyes finding the figure of a woman leaning against the counter against the far wall. She was reading, and didn't look up from the small book in her hand as I approached.

"Is that a fox?" I asked, stopping on the other side of the surface to look at the small animal dozing on her counter.

The woman took her time, finishing her page before marking it and laying the book down beside the cash register.

One long-nailed hand ran over the fox's ears and she smiled. "His name is Zahir."

The fox opened his eyes at her voice and I searched its gaze for anything preternatural.

Perhaps it really was just a fox.

“I’m just exploring,” I told the woman as I finally looked up to meet her eyes. She was taller than me, standing probably almost six feet, with deep brown skin and dark eyes to match. Her hair fell in a shiny black curtain to her waist and she wore a white blouse tucked into jeans. She was older than me, though witches hovered around maturity until they were in their fourth century. Seeing as this woman’s human age looked to be around forty, I was willing to bet she had hit her fourth century some time recently.

“I know.” She smiled. “Welcome to my shop. Unfortunately, if you’re looking for New Orleans witch swag, you’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“I’m not.” I found a basket of crystals on her counter and pushed one around thoughtfully with my knuckle. I didn’t *need* any supplies, but my last few days had been very magical.

A thought occurred to me and I looked up.

“Are you part of the New Orleans Coven?” It came out more accusatorily than I wanted it to, but I didn’t take it back.

The woman held my gaze, letting the silence fall between us. “Do you ask out of curiosity, or because if I was, then perhaps I would not be so fond of the witch who threatened Collette Villere and threatened to destroy the entire coven?”

My face fell in shock and finally her own expression changed as she laughed in amusement.

“How did you-“

“*All* the witches know. If you wanted to stay under her radar, perhaps you shouldn’t have threatened her coven so blatantly.” She beamed, eyes sparkling. “As it is, I’m not part of it. I practice my own magic and keep my own council.” Her hand resumed stroking the fox’s ears. “So you are safe from insult in my shop.”

“Don’t you find it strange to be so close to a voodoo shop?” I inquired, curious more than anything. “Don’t most witches prefer to not be so close to it?”

“So long as I find no *gris-gris* in my shop without prior warning, I like sharing a street. Nathaniel brings me coffee and I sometimes make us lunch, plus he is one of the few who Zahir doesn’t mind.” Her eyes searched mine. “Is that *all* you want to ask me?”

My eyebrows knit and I dropped my hand to my side. “I don’t suppose you’re looking for help?” I ventured, half sarcastically.

“Perhaps. But once again-I think something heavier weighs on your soul that you could speak to me of.”

While witches fell into specializations-elementalists, summoners, healers, and more, there was no set list of powers a witch could have. Prophecy, mind reading, empathy…the list went on and on.

I had no idea what I was dealing with in this woman, but it was enough to set my teeth on edge with how easily she could read me.

“Do you know much about fortune telling?” I inquired. While summoners were the only true fortune tellers of the witch world-supposedly-other witches dabbled in tarot and oracle readings as well. My mother was much better at telling fortunes than I was, for instance, even though she was not a born summoner like me.

“Enough,” the woman allowed. “Come.” She strode away from the register and I followed. The door at the front of the shop creaked closed, making me jump. Still I walked behind her into an alcove in the back where a round table sat with two chairs facing each other from either side.

The woman waved me to the closest seat, and then sank down across from me. “You may call me Marin,” she said expectantly. As if Zahir sensed that his owner had moved, the drowsy fox sprung up from his comfortable position, jumping to the low shelf that hung right behind the witch. Behind Marin, as she’d said her name was.

“George,” I replied. “Georgette Levasseur.”

Her eyes widened, showing shock for the first time at my name. “A Levasseur speaking to me of fortunes? I should feel honored, even if your family is no longer what they once were.”

“Not true.” I pressed my hand to the table, my magic swelling between my fingers. Under my hand, my three cards of power materialized from sparks of magic. I lifted my hand, spreading them in a line.

She stared at them, though did not try to touch them.

“Then I think my honor may be edged with surprise, George. Why does a *summoner* need another witch’s help in divining any fortune, let alone her own?”

“Because I’m twenty-four and frankly, not great at it,” I answered tersely. “I know how to read cards, and I’ve been reading them for myself for years. Big things and little things-what to have for breakfast, what to put on my algebra exam last year...” She looked at me disparagingly and I

hurried onward. “I tried to read my fortune today but it was as if I couldn’t. Like the cards had a mind of their own. Not to mention…”

I swept my palm over my three Major Arcana and they vanished in a swirl of light. Then I took my favorite deck from my bag, shuffled, and without looking drew a card.

I didn’t need to look, but I did anyway.

The Tower.

“No matter what I try to read, this always comes up. Love life, daily life-I’m pretty sure I could read my ‘what’s for dinner’ fortune right now and still get the Tower.” As I spoke I shuffled again, redrawing the card *yet again.* Finally I put the deck back into my bag as Marin pulled a box from under the table and set it down in front of her.

“Forgive me,” she said almost dryly. “I have to do this the long way.”

Witches who were not summoners had to infuse their cards almost every time with their magic. Marin lit two candles, brought the essence of two crystals, and still tapped her deck three times before shuffling them and spreading them in an arc over the table.

She gestured at me and I reached forward, palm hovering over the cards as I searched the identical backs for that something that pulled me to whichever one I was meant to draw.

There.

I flipped a card, frowning down at *The Tower.*

Marin dragged the card to her, using only one finger as she set it between the candles and crystals.

“There is chaos in your life,” she said.

“Yeah, but I don’t understand; what chaos? *When*?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Now. All aspects of your life are tinged with it, and I believe that is why this card comes up for you.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Readings don’t *work* like that,” I insisted.

Marin flipped the card and reshuffled her deck. “Ask my deck for an answer,” she prompted.

My brow raised. “Out *loud*? Isn’t that just for tourists?”

“It is.” She didn’t say more, and I sighed heavily.

“*Ravioli, Ravioli, tell me the future-oli,”* I grumped. “What does my love life have in store for me this year?”

It was a testament to my self control that I didn’t rip her Tower card in half when I drew it.

She snorted sympathetically and took it from my fingers, quite possibly fearing for the fate of the card in my hand.

"You should go home," the witch advised, sliding her cards back into the box. "With this ill-luck surrounding you, it is a bad night to be taking chances."

The driver's face flashed through my head. "This man said something to me tonight. It was…" I tried to repeat the phrase as best I could, though by Marin's expression I had heartily butchered it.

"*Laissez les bons temps rouler, cher,"* she said with the same rich accent that the driver had. "It's only a saying; 'let the good times roll. Did he say anything else?"

Did I trust her to tell her the rest?

Not at all.

"No. Just that. I'm overthinking everything. My cousin reminded me that most fortunes aren't so heavy like humans think. I'm just being stupid."

Marin hummed, hefting Zahir in her arms as she stood. "Go home," she advised still. "For tonight, at the very least. I don't think it'll be a good night for exploring the Quarter."

In an instant I'd plastered an amenable smile on my face and nodded. "You're right." She wasn't, and I didn't believe her warnings. "I'll come pay a visit again soon?"

"I'm open from afternoon until very late," Marin agreed. "And I look forward to your company."

"Thanks for the reading." The door opened before I could touch it, and outside sounds came *whooshing* back to me in the form of harsh voices and loud music.

"It was my pleasure." Already she was back to her book, Zahir asleep once more. "Goddess keep you, George."

"And to you as well." I didn't close the door behind me, and certainly did not look to grab a ride home. It was still early, and I wasn't done exploring just yet.

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CHAPTER 10

Thanks to the directions of more than one stranger, I finally found my way to an appropriate adventure location.

The cemetery I'd been directed to was *not* ruled by the witches, I'd been promised, and was one of the oldest in New Orleans.

That was perfect for me. Cemeteries were high on my list of 'desirable adventure locations' and even more so if I wasn't going to get mugged by pissed off coven members.

Not to mention vampires couldn't come in unless they were invited, rendering me safe from that crowd.

My mind drifted to Cian, Akiva, and Indra, unbidden, and my displeasure fell more firmly onto my lips. Not that they were going to show up, I wagered. Not that they would even know I was here.

Or cared.

My shoes scuffed against the pavement, though I paid them no attention. As midnight had come and gone, fog had settled around the cemetery like a heavy mantle. It was as if the graves were inverted, the bodies preserved above ground instead of under. Had a body ever come spilling out at someone's feet because of the graves eroding away with time? That sounded traumatizing, frankly. I wondered if all the cemeteries in New Orleans were like this. Was the ground unfit for digging graves, or was there some other reason for this practice?

Either way, I was fascinated by the different body houses. Many of them were different from the ones before, and I found no real rhyme or reason in their designs. Was it up to the family of the deceased to build these tombs? Or did you come and pick out the one you liked the best?

Maybe tomb real estate agent was a viable career down here.

A wrought iron fence surrounded one tomb, and I wrapped my fingers around the bars to peer at the name etched into the white stone.

Carson White. Beloved father, brother, son. God watch over you.

Glancing down, my mouth quirked into a small frown at the sight of my Baphomet t-shirt. Was I being a bit sacrilegious by wearing it to a cemetery? Probably.

I pulled away from the fence, no longer interested, and continued on my walk. No one else was in the cemetery this late, not surprisingly, and it was far enough from real civilization that I could barely hear the murmur and mumbling of the party that never stopped. Once in a while music caught my ears, or a yell, but even that I was able to push away.

My steps led me to an open intersection in the middle of the cemetery. Benches sat on the rock, and I made my way over to them to sit cross legged on the stone surface.

There was magic here, as there was in any cemetery. This particular one was so old that the magic had soaked into the very tombstones themselves. Generations of preternatural creatures had turned this place into a macabre river of power that fought and flowed against itself.

It was unusable magic by any except those with an affinity for the dead like necromancers or liches.

But magic was magic. I pulled my favorite deck from my bag, fingers running reverently along the smooth surfaces of my cards, and I shuffled through them as I looked around the part of the cemetery I could see.

I didn’t know *why* I was doing this. I’d tried numerous times today with numerous decks and still got the same card.

Maybe I just wanted to scream my frustrations when I drew The Tower again in a place where no one would judge. I was supposed to be a fortune teller, but right now I felt like more of a magician pulling the same card over and over.

Tapping the deck three times, I shuffled again to really shake it up, then spread the deck on the bench in front of me somewhat haphazardly.

It didn’t matter much, I knew, and instead of taking the time to run my hand over all of it to feel the push and pull of energy, I simply lifted my left hand, palm flat, and *jerked* hard at the power of the cards to tell me what my immediate future held.

Just as expected, a face down card flew into my hand. The Tower had been doing that all day. I wasn't shocked for it to happen now.

Sighing, my mouth turned sharply into a disappointed scowl as I turned the card around to glower at it like a misbehaving child.

Only, *The Tower* was not what stared back up at me.

This time I held *The Ten of Swords.*

I didn't move. *Everyone* knew that this was probably the worst card in the deck to draw for a reading-especially a single card reading-and here we were.

If it had been reversed, I would've not been so upset. The Ten of Swords upside down signified recovery and regeneration.

Right side up, as I was holding it, signified danger. Crisis.

Painful Endings.

Fitting, since the card so happily featured a man on the ground with ten swords impaling him in the back.

My heartbeat quickened. The reading I'd asked for with my magic was for *tonight.* Not tomorrow. Not in a week. *Right now.*

Maybe Marin had been right; I should've just *gone the fuck home.*

"Readings aren't usually so doom and gloom," Aveline's voice echoed in my head.

She was probably right. It was stupid to get so worked up over a vague, possibly insignificant-

Even without my wolf ears present, I could hear the footsteps on the gravel of the cemetery.

I drew my cards into my hand and back into my bag, then stood up and spun in a slow circle to survey my surroundings.

"Who's there?" I called. There was no point trying to sneak away. If I could hear whoever it was with my human ears, they'd known I'd been here for much longer.

A man rounded a corner, white-blonde hair bright in the light of the half moon. He was broad, with a muscular build and had to be at least six feet tall, if not more.

He looked unbothered with the situation, and only vaguely interested in me.

It was a convincing act; one I might even believe if the memory of my reading wasn't so clearly on my mind.

I watched, silent, as he studied the tomb nearest him before finally meandering closer to where I stood, strap of my bag clutched so tightly in my fingers that my knuckles were turning white.

He wasn't human. I took a deep breath to try to discern his scent, but that only flooded my nose with cologne and made the man turn towards me.

"It's late," he said conversationally. "A bit late for a visit here, isn't it?"

Staring at him, I carefully shrugged my shoulders. "I just like to explore," I mumbled finally, adjusting my glasses with one finger and turning to watch him walk.

"In a graveyard?" His smile turned skeptic. "I didn't think witches were *that* stupid. At least stick to your own territory."

Did he think I was with the Coven?

"Why does it matter to you?" My voice had turned cold, and when he looked at me again his eyes were the bright yellow of something not-so-human.

Shit.

"It doesn't. You've just done me a favor by making yourself easier to find." Absently he drew a long, shiny knife from his waist, the blade having been hidden by his shirt.

I should've just gone home, damn it.

My fingers curled tighter on my bag. "You don't know me," I pointed out. "So I'm not sure what you want-"

"You were with the new *king* two nights ago, I hear" the man accused, pointing the knife at me and shaking the tip as if to chastise me.

I took a step back, edging around the bench and putting the cement between us.

"The new king?" I repeated, eyes narrowed.

Then it hit me.

Cian.

"Oh-no I'm not *with him*," I explained. "I was only there to get my cousin back. I have nothing to do with him-or any of them."

The man's eyebrows rose. "That's not what I was told. Seems to me the four of you were quite friendly last night."

"That wasn't-"

"I don't really need you to explain it away to me. The facts are that you fought with him, you're close with him, and now you'll pay like him."

“What does that mean?” I asked sharply. Were people after Cian and the others as well? Why hadn’t any of them warned me?

“It means you should’ve known better than to stray so far from his protection, little witch.” Before I could speak again he was coming towards me, stride no longer casual, but I held my ground as he approached.

My wards were replenished. I had no reason to fear his attack-

His grin grew wider and I felt my wards flare, only to suddenly disappear like they’d never been there in the first place. I yelled, stumbling backward, but the knife blade caught my arm before I could get away. Hot pain shot up my arm and I bit my lip at the sudden shock of it. Still I managed to stay on my feet, though I kept as much distance between us as he would allow.

“How did you-“

His grin widened. “Blue vervain is a wonderful thing, is it not? Pity it’s so hard to properly process these days.”

My magic was *useless* against magically enhanced blue vervain. As powerful as it was rare, I’d heard it could be ingested to create a temporary immunity to witch magic.

“They really *aren’t here?”* the man laughed, looking around. “I thought they’d come running in when I attacked you.”

“They aren’t here because I barely know them!” I snapped. Silently I wished they were here. I might not know them well, but I still felt as if I had done enough to earn even a phone call to warn me of what was going on.

He seemed to consider that, then shrugged. “Better safe than sorry, right? Besides-“ His grin turned almost apologetic. “I’m *really* hungry.”

At his words I spun and took off in a dead sprint, making my way up the row of tombs I’d come from.

I could hear him behind me, and when I looked back I saw that he was keeping up with me effortlessly. He wasn’t even *trying*. No, the wendigo was stalking me like the prey he saw me as.

I turned down another row, his laugh echoing off of the stone around us, and found myself at the entrance to the cemetery.

If I got back to the quarter, surely he couldn’t follow me. Not with everyone there.

Movement caught my eye and I slid to a stop, nearly overbalancing when a new figure leaned against the entry gates to the cemetery.

Red eyes glittered in the darkness and she smiled. She had been in the clearing and had disappeared with the vampires who'd refused to submit to Cian.

"Were you going somewhere?" the pale vampire asked, eyes wide with faux naiveté. "Am I in your way?" She made a show of stepping aside and gestured to the gate with a flourish. "I don't like cemeteries, but if you come out to me I'm sure I can help you find your way."

"Like I said to him," I snapped, sidestepping and turning so that I could keep both preternaturals in my vision. "I'm not *with* Cian."

The man shrugged once more.

"Wouldn't he have come to help me? Wouldn't he be here if I was?" I turned on the vampire, hoping to appeal to some semblance of a better nature with her.

She was studying her nails very pointedly.

"Are you going to play with your food or eat it, Jameson?" she asked finally, her red eyes flicking to the man prowling about with the knife. "I don't wish to be here all night."

"My apologies," As he spoke, his voice got lower, more guttural, like he had something stuck in his throat. "I didn't know we were on a timetable."

His body twitched, limbs jolting at unnatural angles like he was being shocked.

As I watched, his arms lengthened, thinning so that the flesh had to stretch over the bones grotesquely. Fingers contorted, becoming longer, and talons crept from his nail beds.

Teeth lengthened last as he paused his shift hallway through, forgoing the antlers and skull that I'd unhappily expected to appear.

I'd never seen a wendigo before, but here he was. An actual, fucking wendigo with plans to eat me.

I threw a look at the vampire, who raised her brows at my panicked look. "You're free to come out here," she invited. "I've taken vervain as well; your little cards will do nothing to me, and your wards will not stop me from tearing out your throat. Which will it be, little witch? A wendigo's fangs or mine?"

Her eyes glowed brighter at the prospect.

The knife clattered to the ground-Jameson didn't need it with how long his talons were-and a mouth fit only for ripping flesh to shreds grinned at me, eyes gone white above his fangs and bone-sharp features.

It was fortunate that they didn't know what *else* I was, though that surprise wouldn't work after tonight.

Gently I let my bag slide to the ground, toeing my shoes off after it.

The wendigo laughed wetly, gesturing at me with one long-fingered hand.

"*Don't bother*." His words were slurred, voice guttural. This form was not made for speaking from. "*I don't mind ripping them off while I eat.*"

Yikes.

"I'm not afraid of you," I lied, my eyes blazing bright blue as I let my inner wolf out to play. Shape shifting wasn't like witch magic. I didn't have to do a spell or call up a spark. It simply existed as a part of me, and I could change my skin to fur as easily as blinking.

He paused, head cocked as my ears parted my hair, tail curled around my waist as my own claws lengthened.

But I didn't stop at a half shift.

Smoothly I shifted forms, the process taking only seconds so that I could stand in front of him as a very light, almost white wolf.

It was impossible to mistake a werewolf for a real one. Not only was I pushing two hundred and fifty pounds in this form, I was taller than a normal wolf, with shoulders and front legs built more like a tiger's for grabbing and holding on. My claws, too, hooked forward from the fur of my paws, scratching on the stone under me as I bared long fangs in a growl.

"*You're a hybrid.*" The wendigo tossed an accusing glare at the vampire, who stared at my new form.

"I didn't know," she snapped.

"*No matter, I suppose. You'll be dinner either way.*" He stepped towards me, saliva dripping from a mouth that couldn't properly close.

It was unfortunate that I couldn't speak to him in this form.

My claws curled like a cat's into the stone below me, scratching the hard surface and a snarl escaped my jaws, just as guttural as his. He pulled back, face contorting for half a second before he snapped his teeth at me. It was fear. He was *afraid* of me, if only a little bit.

Inwardly, I grinned.

If the goddess let me get home alive, I would never ignore my deck's screaming warnings again.

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CHAPTER 11

The impact with the wendigo jarred me and I bit back a yelp, digging my teeth into any available part of him that I could while he grabbed me with too-sharp claws around my shoulders. He held on, jerking us to the stone and trying to pin me there.

But that would be a death sentence, and I tried to push the looming fear of his teeth around my throat out of my mind.

The vampire prowled outside the gates, watching eagerly.

For all that the wendigo was thin and wiry, he was also incredibly strong. The stark muscles in his arms seemed to be made of steel cable, and it was impossible to pin him under my heavier weight.

Claws scored across my chest, and when I snapped at his face he snapped right back, catching the skin of my muzzle and tearing it.

Finally my teeth found purchase at his shoulder. He screamed when I shook him like a rag doll, but didn't let go. Instead his claws dug deeper, forcing me away from him when he flung me across the ground to land in a heap.

Getting the air back in my lungs, I struggled to my feet with blood and flesh falling from my open mouth to the ground below.

Everything hurt. The wounds from his claws stung, even as they healed, and the wendigo looked to barely care about his own healing wounds.

"*Troublesome prey*," he seemed to admonish. "*I don't feel like working for my dinner*." His mouth was stained with my blood, and I worried that if I gave him the chance he would finish his shift.

I'd be no match for him in his full wendigo state if I couldn't take him out as he was.

I lunged, using my strength to knock into him once more and sent us rolling across the stones, my jaws snapping at his throat and his teeth biting down anywhere they could. They were not made for letting go, and already my fur was covered in my own blood from all the times he'd bitten in and ripped his teeth free. My own regeneration was slowing, the wounds healing more sluggishly and burning as they closed.

My only saving grace was that his wounds were healing just as slowly.

He pushed me free again, then stood as I struggled to my paws, panting.

"*You can't beat me.*"His form was shifting again, hair lengthening and thickening on his head and arms as a skull covering grew over his face. There it was; exactly what I'd been afraid of.

Might as well take my chance with the vampire, by trying to run, if my only other choice was dealing with a fully shifted wendigo.

As he shifted, his wounds suddenly seemed to be healing much more quickly. Mine hadn't healed. Not yet. Blood mixed with saliva still dribbled from my parted jaws, spattering the white stone under me. The graveyard keeper was going to have a hell of a surprise when he started his shift.

His lips twisted into a grin and he opened his mouth tauntingly.

The wendigo didn't get the chance to speak. He squealed in pain and in an instant, blood spurted from his gaping jaws. He spat unintelligible words, his actions pinning me to the ground with confusion. Until my eyes caught on the hand punched through his chest, fingers curled around his insides that were now *outsides*.

I couldn't act. I was dumbfounded, and I found myself thinking sluggishly as my wounds still struggled to heal. Finally my roving gaze found the woman's face who stood behind the wendigo, her other hand around his throat.

Sea-green eyes shone in the darkness, the pupils wide, and her lips were parted to reveal a mouth full of thin fangs. Her gaze shifted to me.

"*Run*," she spat. "Go *now.*"

I didn't need to be told twice.

I ran.

On my way out of the cemetery I grabbed my thigh bag, able to slide it over my neck to carry it out with me. There was no way I was leaving my cards in this cemetery.

In my excitement, I had forgotten about the vampire. A blur of motion caught my eye, but before I could properly see her, she was in front of me,

hand out and something shining in her palm.

I ducked to the side, paws slamming against the pavement as I ran, but all the same I felt the pain of something *hot* and *sharp* bury itself in my shoulder.

It burned, the pain not fading, and the vampire howled in frustration after me.

But I didn't care; I *ran.*

It wouldn't have been smart to sprint into the quarter like this. If I was unlucky-and let's face it, I absolutely *was*-I'd get mistaken for a feral shape shifter and killed before I could explain just what had me in this state.

So I skirted the city, my pace slowing only slightly as I wound my way down and up darkened residential streets and alleys that were not filled with people.

Through the combination of scent and my bond with Aveline, I found my way home. My entire body ached from the fight, though most of my wounds had managed to heal as I sprinted through the less populated areas of the Quarter. Thankfully, I remembered a few directions from people that I'd gotten in the Quarter as well, making it that much easier for my paws to carry me home.

At last, after what had easily been two hours of almost nonstop running, I limped up the stairs to stand in our doorway, only dimly surprised to see Aveline's car in the driveway.

Instead of shifting back-what would the neighbors think of a naked, bloody blonde after all-I scratched my paw against the door like a lost dog, letting out a loud, high-pitched whine.

It took Aveline only a minute, and when she opened the door she smiled, mouth open with some quip of a greeting on her lips.

When she saw me, her face fell instantly. "Oh *Goddess*," she hissed, throwing the door wide so I could limp through it. "*George?"*

Once she had closed the door behind me I shifted back, making it only to my half shifted form and sinking to the floor in a heap.

"Ward-refresh your wards-" I panted, limbs shaking. My shoulder still burned-it had never stopped hurting-but I still had no idea why. It was more important for us to be protected.

"Your shoulder!" Aveline dropped to the hardwood across from me, not minding my nudity or blood spattered skin as she pushed my hair back from my neck. "Hold still, okay?"

Dazed, I didn't understand, and couldn't figure out why she had one hand braced against my arm while she gripped something with the other.

Then she pulled back, and I screamed.

The burn in my chest was from a *silver knife* that the female vampire had apparently so kindly gifted me during my escape.

"Is that-" I glared at the offending object. "Is that *silver?"* It was a dumb question. I knew it was silver by the way the wound over my collarbone still burned and refused to close.

"Yes." Aveline chucked the blade into the kitchen and turned back to me.

"Aveline you need to ward-"

"You're still bleeding-"

"*Re-ward your damn house!"* I screamed, voice much louder than I'd intended to be and eyes blazing.

She met my eyes searchingly before nodding and getting to her feet.

Now I could focus on how much I hurt.

My bag was still around my waist, and without a thought I tossed it further into the house to land on the sofa. Somehow it had remained mostly blood free. I was glad, being that I was unsure of how well I could clean blood out of the faux leather.

Aveline's legs crossed my vision as she went from the kitchen to the front door, locking it and murmuring a spell under her breath as the scent of herbs tickled my nose.

She held a candle as she worked, the flame flickering this way and that when she doubled the protections on the house around us.

Hopefully the *vervain* would wear off if the wendigo and vampire came knocking all the way out here.

My mind flashed briefly to the teal-eyed woman who'd saved me, her hand bloody as she'd impaled the wendigo on it. Who in the world was she?

Unfortunately, that was too much for my brain tonight. I slumped back on my knees, bracing myself on my good arm until Aveline came back.

"Here." She had a white robe with her, the satiny material draped over her arm. "Put this on."

"I'll bleed on it," I told her, aware that she knew this too.

Aveline scowled. "You've bled all over my steps, door, and *floor.* I don't care and I'll get it out later. Now come on." She urged me to stand, helping me into the robe as I did.

“What happened?” She was remarkably calm as she spoke, pulling herbs from the cabinets that tinged the air with their strong scents that tickled my nose. I blinked once, then again, trying to see the herbs more clearly. My vision swam, preventing me from seeing more than green blurs in her hands.

“I went to the Quarter, like I told you. A witch there told me to *go home.*” A small, defeated laugh left me. “I bet even her fox was judging me for being such an idiot. Obviously I should’ve listened. At this cemetery I was exploring-“ At the words she looked at me in exasperated alarm-“I did another reading for myself. Drew myself the Ten of Swords instead of The Tower. Isn’t that great?” My voice remained dry. “You know-if I didn’t have bad luck in this town I wouldn’t have any luck at all.”

“Who draws the Ten of Swords for themselves, even?” Aveline muttered with a shake of her head.

“Me? So this guy showed up and told me that since I’d helped in the little vampire coup two nights ago, I get to *die.*” It was easier for me to talk about it sarcastically while trying not to focus on the pain in my shoulder or the blood trickling down my chest and stomach. The robe stuck to me uncomfortably and parts of the silk were already dyed red.

“Why didn’t you call your cards?” My cousin looked up in confusion. “Instead of letting him chew on you. What was he, a lion?”

“A *wendigo*,” I shot back. “A *vervain slurping* wendigo.”

Her hand slowed. “My wards won’t stop someone taking vervain,” she said softly.

“Surely he doesn’t have enough to keep taking it,” I dismissed.

“With your Ten of Swords style luck tonight, I wouldn’t take that bet. Also, it still doesn’t explain how you ended up here with a silver knife sticking out of your chest.”

“He had a friend outside the cemetery in case I tried to get out that way. A vampire. She had the silver knife and a vervain sniffing habit like him.”

“Please tell me they’re both dead and rotting in a ditch.”

I shook my head, wincing. By now the other wounds on my body were healed, though I ached from the toll of how much healing I’d done.

The knife wound would heal human-slow, without intervention.

“I couldn’t even-“ a choked laugh bubbled from my lips and I leaned heavily on the table, head in my hands. “Av I couldn’t even fight him when he was *half shifted*. What the *fuck*?”

It made me think significantly less of myself, truth be told. Was I really so weak without my summoning?

“So how’d you get away?”

I quickly summarized the rest of the night, telling her tersely about the woman, the drive-by stabbing, and making my way home. When I’d finished, she approached, setting the stone bowl down on the table and sitting in front of me.

“You’re fortunate,” my cousin said, not for the first time. “Even if you do have terrible luck.” She scooped the strong-smelling salve she’d made up on her hand and reached forward to lather it onto the stab wound.

Immediately I hissed, showing fang, and drew backward only for my cousin to scowl. “Oh sit still! It’s this or you go to the emergency room and get it treated.”

I didn’t want-or need-that.

When she’d finished, she taped a wide gauze bandage over the wound and let me lean back in the chair with a groan. “That’s going to take a few days or so to heal,” she observed. “And I’m taking off work tomorrow. We’ve got to do something about this. *Especially* since the vampire king who so helpfully put you in danger didn’t bother to warn you. Surely he knows about this by now!”

I shrugged my good arm, but it still hurt and I moaned. “Fuck if I know. They *have my number* so I would’ve thought they could call.”

Unless, like I suspected, they just didn’t care.

“I’m going to scry for them in the morning,” Aveline pressed. “Even if they don’t want to keep in contact, they’re *going* to sweep up this little problem. Isn’t that what Clades *do*? They make sure rogue vampires aren’t running around to kill people?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Aveline deflated, looking exhausted for the first time. “Go shower or something, then you really need to sleep. I’ll stay up until dawn.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to tell her that I’d gotten us into this mess, so I would be the one responsible for keeping watch until a more reasonable hour when only centuries-old vampires could roam around.

But all I wanted to do was sleep for a few hundred hours or more.

So I didn’t argue. I offered her a half grin and stood shakily. “Thanks Av,” I told her softly.

“You can use my shower,” she offered in reply. “There’s a bench so you won’t drown if you need to pass out.”

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CHAPTER 12

At precisely ten-oh-two in the morning, the doorbell rang.

My eyes snapped open and I sat up from the sofa, ready to attack, and only belatedly considered that killers probably didn't ring doorbells.

Aveline was nowhere in sight and the light filtering through the drapes was muted. When I peered between them I saw the sky was heavy with clouds and threatened rain. Wonderful.

The doorbell sounded again and I stood, mind fixed on finding some kind of clothing. I'd slept on the sofa while Aveline kept watch from the recliner, neither of us wanting to be alone.

Putting on a shirt, let alone wearing it against the still-raw wound in my shoulder, hadn't sounded like an enjoyable idea, so I hadn't put one on. Now, not only was Aveline incognito somewhere else, I was half naked with a very noticeable gash over my collarbone and someone at the door. Good morning to me.

"Just a second!" I called, ducking into my room to grab an oversized t-shirt and pushing the long sleeves up to my elbows.

On my way back I ducked into her room, finding my cousin snoring lightly on her bed, phone still in her hand.

It was most likely one of Aveline's friends at the door, and I had so thoroughly convinced myself of that while in my half-asleep state that I yanked the door open without looking through the peephole.

Indra knelt on my doorstep, hand on the dried blood from the night before.

When I leaned my head out he looked up, eyes bright red. “There’s blood here,” he announced, as if I didn’t know.

“There’s…blood there,” I repeated slowly, squinting my eyes behind my glasses.

Behind him, Akiva slouched up the front stairs. Cian had just finished crossing the street and made his way up to the doorstep.

All at once I was awake and very, *very* irritated.“I don’t want you here!” I snapped, my ears and tail springing up in defense. Even my teeth had gone sharp and long canines garbled my words slightly.

Indra looked at me, tipping his head in utter confusion. “George-“

“No! No *George* this or that! *There’s blood there* and it is *absolutely your fault!*” Wildly I gestured at Akiva, who looked taken aback.

“Oh?” he drawled, standing behind Indra on the porch. “It’s my fault you’re in, quite frankly, a piss-ass mood this morning, *ya haram*?”

I lunged forward, wolf instincts taking over, only to be stopped short by Cian who was very suddenly only inches from me.

He stood between me and the others, hands gripping my wrists and his smile wide in the face of my snarling.

“You have neighbors you know,” he told me sweetly. “And I think one of them is about to get concerned. Can we come in so you can accuse us in the safety of your own home?”

“No!” I snapped.

“Wonderful.” He all but lifted me back into the doorway, pushing me back on the hardwood and out of the way so the others could enter.

Akiva came in last and closed the door behind him gently.

It occurred to me very late that there was blood everywhere.

Cian noticed immediately, his pupils swelling to nearly encompass the red of his eyes. “That’s your blood.” It wasn’t a question and his eyes tracked the dried bloody paw prints across the floor to where I’d collapsed last night, and into the kitchen. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ll be *fine*,” I hissed, trying to stamp down on my irrational anger by willing my fangs to go away.

“That’s why you’re so upset, but you should’ve healed by now.” Cian’s eyes scrutinized my body, finally alighting on my shoulder. “Show me.”

“Bite me.” While I knew my attitude wasn’t right, it was damn satisfying to talk to him like that.

He didn’t push it-he really did have more sense than I did-but I still growled at him softly in my throat.

“What happened?” Indra wandered past me, nostrils flared as he knelt down beside the largest bloodstains on the floor.

“What *happened*?” I repeated, temper flaring once more as I whirled on Indra.

This time Akiva caught me, which did not make me any happier, and smiled in the face of my frustration

“You can take it out on me,” he invited. “I might even like it.”

Before I could enact my concrete plans of strangling him on my already-bloodstained floor, Cian was there again.

“Whatever it is, we didn’t know,” he told me in a placating voice.

“I don’t believe that.” My harsh blue gaze turned on him. “It’s too much of a coincidence for you to show up here so soon. Plus-they came after me *because* of you.”

Now his half-smile fell and Cian looked away almost guiltily.

“We came to warn you.” Indra stood, walking confidently towards me like I wasn’t halfway to becoming a spitting, snapping ball of fur. “The vampires who wouldn’t submit to Cian think you’re with us…which you now seem to already know.” He reached out to hook his finger in the loose collar of my shirt. I didn’t stop him and he drew the collar down until he could see the edge of the bandage.

“Do you want to know what’s going on, or not? If you’d rather act like a pissed off Pomeranian, I’d be glad to watch you throw a fit. It’s rather amusing,” Akiva said slowly. “But if you would like to speak about this rationally, let us *sit.* Calm down and talk with us. All right?” Akiva’s grip around my unhurt shoulder was firm but gentle. His eyes held mine like magnets and I found myself leaning into him ever so slightly.

“Well you’re still late.” My irrational anger was gone at Akiva’s words and embarrassment burned the back of my throat like acid. My voice no longer held the same level of venom, and I figured they were no longer in danger of my fangs for the time being. “Why didn’t you warn me sooner?”

“Because of me,” Cian went to the couch and sat, inviting me over like it wasn’t my damn house. I ignored the invite. He leaned forward, hands clasped in front of him, and gazed at me steadily. “We got a call from another vampire that night at the club telling us that Lucia was making threats. We went to deal with it.”

“So? If you knew, then-“

“She surprised me,” Cian said starkly, interrupting my rapid-fire interrogation. “Would’ve been nice to know what her and her brother are capable of, but I didn’t even think to ask. Indra paid the price for my overconfidence, and we weren’t in a position to get word to you.”

Indra ran a hand through his close-cut hair with a sigh. “Sorry,” he intoned.

“I’m not upset at you.” How could I be? “But you didn’t get rid of them?” I looked to Akiva, eyes narrowing as I watched him sit down in our recliner.

“Lucia weaves very convincing illusions,” the lich informed me in his richly accented voice. “I could not find the real *her* before all of them eluded me.”

I set my teeth against the protests that fought to escape my lips, reminding myself that I hadn’t exactly been able to get rid of even *one* vampire and her crazy wendigo.

Akiva looked at me, as if he could read my mind, mouth quirked in an almost smile.

“Cian could heal this,” Indra spoke, drawing my attention and quite possibly my dampened frustration. “It has to hurt, right?”

Damn right it hurt.

“Aveline treated it,” I said, words deliberate. “I’ll be healed by the weekend.”

“That’s inconvenient,” Indra pressed.

“If he wanted to heal it, I’m sure *Cian* would’ve offered.” I hadn’t meant to sound so harsh, and I regretted my words immediately when his shoulders fell.

“*Cian* figured you’d bite his head off much the way you just did to Indra,” the vampire intoned, no sign of anything but infinite patience touched with amusement in his voice.

I wondered how many centuries it had taken to be able to keep that at-ease attitude going in times like this.

“But I could heal it.” He smiled, eyes on me to gauge my reaction.

Still shaking my head, I wrapped my fingers around the hem of my shirt, inadvertently drawing the material around my waist.

But I had no extra energy for modesty this morning.

“I’m fine,” I promised, though the bitch of an ache in my chest seemed to refute that statement. I’d heal, but it *hurt* all the same.

The hellhound in front of me visibly wilted, one ear twisted back towards the men behind him. He opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it and went to sit on the floor against Cian’s legs.

I blinked at him, head tilted to the side. “You can sit on the sofa, you know,” I invited, bemused

“I figured.” Indra smiled in the face of my ongoing rudeness like I wasn’t being a bitch. But he didn’t move, and his arm wrapped loosely around Cian’s calf as he sat. Why did he always feel the need to be so *close* to the vampire?

Absently I ran my hands over my face, glasses knocked askew, and sighed. “Is that all you want?”

“The plan was to pay you a quick visit. Apologize for leaving the other night, tell you about the vampires, and leave,” Akiva answered. “But you changed our plans a bit.”

“By already knowing?”

“By already knowing and being here like *that*.” He flicked his hand at me dismissively.

I felt my lips pull into a sneer, wolfish temper bubbling under my skin once again. Akiva looked as if he couldn’t care less how his words affected me.

“Hurt and all over the place. I’ll hang out here for awhile, if you want to go back, Cian.” He had spoken before I could and sat back to lounge more comfortably in our recliner.

“Why? It’s daylight. Plus you’ve warned me, and we aren’t close like your rogue vampires think. Shouldn’t you go?” Puzzled, I stared at him.

Akiva looked back to me. “Do you want me to?”

“Well I didn’t say that but I’m not sure why you want to stay, is all.”

“So you want me to stay, then.”

My stomach clenched and I looked away. I did want him to stay. Hell, I would’ve liked to sit on his lap as well. They were too much for me this morning. I ran my hands through my hair, fingers only serving to fluff my wild blonde tangles into a more convincing mane around my face and shoulders.

“Do you want to leave?” Cian asked as I tried to get my tired brain to focus. “If you do, I’ll find you a five star hotel in the northeast until I

convince Lucia's group to stop." It sounded *nice* when he said the words convince, like he'd meet her for tea and talk it out. I doubted that would be his actual intentions. The image of him clutching Gavin's still bleeding head flashed in my head.

"No." The certainty of my answer surprised me, just as much as it apparently surprised the three of them. "No-I'm not going to *run away* because of them." I started to say I wasn't afraid, but it would've been a lie.

"You aren't like us," Akiva pointed out delicately. "Look at you. You barely walked away from a fight with them."

"Didn't he almost *die?*" I flapped my hand towards Indra.

"It was different," the lich argued.

Standing was tiring. Letting out a breath, I walked to the sofa and sat myself on the opposite end from Cian, legs drawn up under me so I could sit cross legged there in my shirt and panties.

"Just so we're clear, it was a vampire and a wendigo who were both intimately acquainted with blue vervain," I intoned softly. "*Not* just a fledgling vampire who stuck me with a silver knife."

But I wondered just how any of these men would have fared against the two I'd met. Would they have been able to hold their own, even defeat both of them?

Would they have been able to fight a fully shifted wendigo?

My turmoil must have been apparent, because Indra moved so he could lean against the sofa in front of me, orange eyes gazing up at me with infinite patience. I met his beautiful orange eyes, long lashes framing his gaze. A very different kind of heat sang under my skin and I looked away, fingers tangling in the hem of my shirt. I still very much wanted to continue what we'd started the other night.

"Can you…" I trailed off, unsure of how to phrase my question without sounding presumptuous, arrogant, or naïve.

I was sure, however, that I was going to accomplish at least one of the three, so I went on. "Are you afraid of wendigos?"

Indra blinked, considering my question. "No," he said after his pause.

"What if they weren't with you?" I signaled towards Cian and Akiva, who remained blessedly silent. "Would you be afraid then?"

He shook his head. "No, George. I'm not afraid a wendigo, no matter if I'm alone or with them." He hesitated. "Are you?"

"Yes," I whispered.

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CHAPTER 13

Trying to keep my face neutral as I fought with an answer, my eyes darted to Akiva nervously. He'd make fun of me for my feelings, I was *sure*.

Akiva only studied me with an intensity that seemed to hold me in place. He didn't speak, not even to rile me with some eloquent insult.

Indra noticed his gaze just as I had. The hellhound approached him, running his hand across Akiva's shoulders. "Don't you have some miracle blood remover you can throw together in the kitchen?" the hellhound asked, taking the initiative for the first time since I'd met him. His tone was not a *suggestion*, which surprised me, and Akiva blinked.

"Yes," he agreed, after a pause, the intensity in his gaze melting away when Indra touched him. "Will you mind me rummaging through your cabinets, George?" He stood, reaching out to pull my hand to him and ran his lips over my knuckles too quickly for me to yank my hand away.

As he wandered into the kitchen, I gazed at my hand like I would see some evidence of his kiss there. Had I liked that? Yeah, I did.

I schooled my face into disinterest and dropped my hand to my lap before Indra caught on. He always seemed so incredibly in tune with everyone's emotions. Was it a hellhound thing, or just *his* thing?

"I'm sure Aveline won't mind either," I called, voice dry with sarcasm. "Since technically those are *her* cabinets you're messing with."

"I'm going outside," Cian said kindly, having the decency to not remark on my visible confusion over Akiva's actions. "I want to check your wards." He strode to the side door, closing it behind him as he disappeared into the yard.

That left only Indra and me, though Akiva could be heard mumbling to himself and banging around in the kitchen.

“Why don’t you take Cian up on his offer?” Indra said kindly, as he sat beside me on the sofa, knees bumping mine as we faced each other on the cushions. “Get out of town for a week or so. Go on a vacation. We owe you for your help in the woods, anyway.”

I could. *We* could. I was sure I could ask them to set Aveline and I up on a trip to get out of the city while they took care of the vampires, judging by how hard they were pushing it.

It would be so *easy*. Neither of us had ever prepared to deal with things like this, and when it was all said and done we could come back and resume living here and I could get a job in the quarter.

It was the best option, I knew.

“No.” Every time I said it, the truth of my answer surprised me. “*No.*” I smiled at him. “I’m terrified, honestly.” A nervous giggle bubbled up from my throat, sounding too loud to my ears “I’ve never seen a fully shifted wendigo up close-he threatened to *eat me*, Indra. I mean-before two days ago I’d only used my summoning in theory-and I’d never *fought* anyone!”

“So you should leave,” Indra pressed. “This isn’t on you-“

“But that’s my choice,” I reminded him. “ I *chose* to help you in the woods. And what about next time? What about when someone from the coven tries to pay me back for my threats?” I was already shaking my head. “Am I supposed to just run away then, too? I would be running for the rest of my *life*. What will you guys do-kill the whole coven when that has nothing to do with you? I can’t rely on you guys to mop up after my bad decisions.” It sounded much too brave to be coming from *me*, but I found myself intent on sticking to my words.

The door opened from the yard and Cian strolled back in, removing his sunglasses and tucking them into his pocket.

“Your neighbor is nice,” he told me, locking the door behind him. “He asked me if we were prostitutes.”

“What did you tell him?” I asked, looking up.

Cian grinned wickedly but didn’t answer. “Let me heal that,” he deflected. “If you’re not going to take our five star vacation offer, then you’re going to get some unwelcome visits until we-“ He looked pointedly at Indra, then Akiva. “get this taken care of.”

“Did you eavesdrop at the window?” I asked. Akiva passed us with a spray bottle full of thick, sloshing green liquid that he squirted onto the floor like windex. “If you ruin the wood, Aveline is going to blow you into the river.”

“It’s organic and hardwood safe,” Akiva quipped. He repeated the process over my paw prints and opened the door to pour the rest of the liquid onto the porch.

“I didn’t need to be at the window to hear you,” Cian told me. “Neither would any other vampire.”

He sat back down on the overstuffed couch, this time stealing Indra’s seat as the hellhound went to help Akiva. Cian’s fingers trailed along Indra’s hip and the hellhound grinned down at Cian, making my stomach twinge in….envy? Definitely envy. I’d never had their kind of relationship with anyone. Except Aveline, in a platonic family way, but even she had her own life these days.

Cian’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Don’t be stupid,” the vampire said, mouth pulling back into his signature charming grin. I opened my mouth to protest-he was obviously going to tell me to take his offer and *leave*-but he didn’t give me the chance to speak. “You can’t fight with a hole in your chest.” Oh. He was talking about *healing* me.

Three different arguments containing varying degrees of insults, arrogance, and quips filtered through my brain, but I let them drop. “Okay,” I agreed, meeting his gaze challengingly. “All right. How do we do this?” I trailed off. Vampires healed themselves and others through blood, I knew. But I doubted I was supposed to just lunge in and go for the throat.

“Can I see?” he looked towards my shoulder.

I hesitated for a moment, before grabbing the black throw blanket. “Close your eyes,” I requested, and he did so without complaint.

I realized that all three men had seen me wearing less than I was now, but I still felt like I needed to reserve some modesty. I stripped out of my shirt and wrapped the throw around myself, tucking it under my arms and holding the slack in one hand. “Okay.”

Cian opened his eyes, reaching forward to peel back the hastily applied bandage from last night.

“Why does it matter?” I asked curiously as he looked at the wound. “Vampire blood is vampire blood, right?”

“Because the severity of the wound impacts how much blood you need,” Cian explained. “If this had nicked an organ or was still bleeding, I’d have you drink from my throat until it healed.”

An image of me perched over Cian, mouth sucking at his neck, flashed unbidden through my brain. *Down girl*, I chastised mentally, wishing that my body would stop doing that when I was trying to make a good impression on the three men.

“But it’s not bad enough for that.” As I watched he lifted his left hand to his mouth, fangs shining bright white where there’d been only human teeth before.

I couldn’t *see* it, but I could very easily hear the small *pop* of his fangs breaking through the delicate skin of his wrist. I watched his face, unable to look away as his eyes grew brighter, even more so than the night in the clearing. I briefly wondered if he was hungry. If he was, would he want to….

Down, George, I told my unhelpful body yet again as I felt a very familiar twinge between my thighs.

I shook my head *hard* to shake myself out of that line of thought *again*.

“You okay?” he asked, lips glittering with blood as he lowered his arm.

“Yeah-absolutely.” I gently reached out to wrap my fingers around his hand. I paused. “Sorry for-for how I acted at the door,” I told him as my mind raced. Was I really about to drink a vampire’s *blood*? What if I gagged? What if I *liked it?* I knew what my own blood tasted like-especially after last night-and the coppery taste was not what I considered appetizing.

“It’s fine,” Cian said patiently. “I live with a hellhound; I get it.”

I snorted, having my doubts that Indra *ever* lost his temper. “This won’t *do* anything to me, right?”

He breathed a good natured-sigh. “Other than heal you?”

Tentatively I raised his wrist to my face, glad he didn’t take the initiative and do so on his own, and met his eyes once more as I awkwardly pressed my mouth to his bleeding wrist.

And *immediately* gagged.

Vampire blood did *not* taste any better than regular blood. It was thicker, and I found that in itself incredibly unappetizing. Still I forced myself to swallow, face screwed up in a grimace as Cian fought not to laugh.

“Not the experience you thought it’d be, I take it?” he teased, hand still limp in my grip. I pulled away, grimacing.

“That’s *disgusting*,” I informed him, swallowing repeatedly to get the last of the blood down my throat.

“You shouldn’t stop yet,” Cian said, putting his other hand to my shoulder and studying the wound. “You’re not healed.” He offered me his still-bleeding wrist once more and I curled my lips in disgust.

Fucking wonderful.

But I listened to him, forcing myself to swallow his blood and *not* spit it back onto the floor. The stab wound in my chest tingled, and I nearly let go of the blanket around my body to reach up and touch it. It wasn’t painful, just foreign feeling, and I wanted to feel what was going on.

My eyes widened as Aveline’s door shut, footsteps coming closer from the other end of the hallway. She waved, not even pausing at the sight of me on the sofa, before breezing right past us and into the kitchen. My eyes found Cian’s, wide, as I started to pull away again.

“Nope,” he reminded me, and I rolled my eyes. “Sorry, Aveline. I didn’t think to let you know we were coming over. Not that I know how to get ahold of you.”

My cousin shrugged, reappearing with a box of cereal that she rummaged through. She looked at me, one brow raised, and I wanted to die of embarrassment. “How’s that going?”

“I don’t think it’s living up to George’s expectations,” the vampire answered.

“I could’ve told you that,” Aveline said as the door opened and Indra reentered with Akiva at his heels. “It’s gross, right? And takes too damn long.”

My cousin had tried *vampire* blood?

I looked at Cian plaintively, *begging* him to tell me that we were done. He leaned towards me, free hand touching the skin around my injury. “Almost,” he said kindly. “I offered your cousin the means to go on a vacation for a few days while we take care of our vampire-and apparently, wendigo-problem,” he said, looking back at the blonde witch. “She declined, but the offer’s open for you as well.”

Aveline finished her mouthful of cereal, chewing thoughtfully, then shook her head. “I have no interest in running away, but can I put that vacation on layaway?”

“You’re done.” Cian pulled his arm away from my mouth and I swiped my forearm across my lips with a scowl.

“That’s *disgusting*,” I said to anyone who might hear.

Cian shrugged, flicking his tongue over his wrist to close the wound.

“Close your eyes again,” I went on, and looked at Akiva and Indra expectantly.

“Why us?” Akiva asked. “We’ve seen you without your shirt.”

“Because I said so.”

Akiva seemed to consider this, then shrugged and dramatically fluttered his eyes before closing them.

I pulled the black shirt back over my head and pushed the sleeves up. Gingerly at first I moved my arm back and forth, expecting at least some of the pain from not five minutes before. Nothing. As Aveline watched I rotated my arm in a full circle, never once feeling any kind of discomfort.

“Wow.” I was surprised, to say the least. “That was fast.”

“Try not to get hurt like that again,” Cian advised. “I’ll give you my blood, but if we do it again soon, you’re going to have some side effects.”

I looked at him sharply. “Like *what*?”

He smiled sweetly. “Nothing that’ll hurt you, I promise.”

The sound of Aveline’s cereal box being shaken made me glance her direction in time to see her upend the box into her open mouth.

“Thank you,” I finally remembered to be grateful and stood. “Now I’m going to go put on some *pants*.”

“Don’t get dressed on my account.” Aveline trailed me down the hallway, eyes accusatory. “Unless you were *undressed* for their benefit and I was interrupting?”

I graced her with a roll of my eyes before closing the door in her face and grabbing a pair of running shorts. She didn’t need to bring up being *naked* with the three men when my thoughts seemed desperate to tug me back to all the possibilities of what we could do here at the house.

Now that I wasn’t in a rush, I ducked into my closet for a shirt not out of the laundry basket, snagging the first t-shirt I could find.

When I reappeared, winding my hair into a messy ponytail, Akiva paused to eye my shirt. “Classy,” he remarked, obviously not appreciating my *100% that witch* emblazoned tee.

“I can’t believe you got the floor clean.” Aveline was *beaming* at the lich. “Thanks, man. What did you use?”

Akiva smiled at her and not for the first time I noted that he was so much less arrogant around my cousin. It was confusing, the way he could go from teasingly mocking to ‘good neighbor’ with my cousin. Was he trying to get on her good side? Was I *jealous?*

“I’ll give you the recipe. It was something my mother came up with; she was a witch too, so I figured you’d have the right ingredients,” he replied.

I went to the recliner and sat, legs under me. “Your mother was a witch?” I asked. “How are you a *lich*, then?”

Akiva looked at me, a scowl tugging at his lips. “Liches are born witches,” he said at last. “But I’d rather not talk about it.”

Oh. I hadn’t known that. To busy my hands, I pushed stray hair out of my face and tucked it behind my ears.

“So I couldn’t get off work for tonight,” Aveline broke in, having abandoned her cereal box. “I traded shifts with someone, though, so I could get home earlier. I was going to try to work out a plan with you to come with me or something, but maybe not?” she glanced at Akiva. “Depending on your plans?”

Akiva shrugged, looking at Cian. “What do you think?”

“I think if George wants the company, we can stay.” The vampire stretched out his long legs, crossing his ankles. “Or you can come with us back to our place.” I didn’t answer right away. As he’d leaned back on the sofa, his shirt had ridden up to expose just enough of his stomach to get my full attention. I absolutely wanted to see more of him.

“Shouldn’t you-or we-be out hunting your rogue vampires?” I asked, trying to rein my thoughts back in.

Cian frowned, then spoke again. “I’d rather not go looking for a fight today.”

“What?” Aveline asked. “Did something happen?”

“I got stabbed,” Indra explained, standing next to her. “By a vampire with a fancy blade.”

“I can make you something to help,” my cousin offered. “If you’re still feeling the effects?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m really a shitty person for not seeing if you need anything. *Do* you need anything?”

“I’ll be fine by tomorrow,” the hellhound promised.

But I looked at him, studying his face carefully. His eyes were tired, dark circles giving him a worn out appearance. He caught my gaze and

smiled.

Why hadn't he hidden out at his own place to heal, instead of coming over here to warn me about the vampires? Last night I'd been sure they didn't care about me getting attacked, but now I wasn't so sure.

Our eyes stayed locked for a few moments longer. Finally I blinked, brows furrowed as I looked away.

Now I felt even guiltier about my going all snarling-wolf in his face.

"You can stay here, if you want," I said finally. "Whatever's easier for you. When are you leaving for work, Av?"

She checked her phone. "Now, honestly," she admitted. "But I can be late if you want me to make you something...?" Cian was shaking his head and Aveline snorted. "Right. Goddess forbid I step on the pride of an *elder vampire* like you." She rolled her eyes at him.

"It's not personal," he said. "And if I felt worse, I'd take you up on the answer."

"*Right."* She grabbed her purse from the table by the door. "Well you guys are welcome to whatever, obviously. Show them the *gym*, George." She flashed a devious grin in my direction and I rolled my eyes.

"Text me if you need anything," I shot back. "And when you're on your way home."

"Later, Aveline," Akiva called, and she returned the sentiment before closing the door behind her.

The lich turned to me with interest. "The gym?" he repeated. "What's so special about the *gym*?"

"Do you see that door?" I pointed at the door at the end of the hall. "Go open it. That's the gym."

"Is something going to attack me?"

"Yes."

Akiva went anyway, going to the door and opening it slowly as if he was worried about what awaited on the other side.

I could hear his amused snort from the recliner as I got to my feet and headed towards the kitchen.

Indra was still there, leaning on the counter to look out the window to the street beyond.

"You okay?" I asked, opening the fridge and grabbing a can of vanilla coke.

“Just tired,” he admitted. “It’s been a long few days.” He accepted the can of soda I offered.

“Surprised someone else likes these,” I said skeptically when he opened it and took a long drink.

“I’m not picky.”

“Do you want to take a nap? We have an *amazing* couch, or you can go to my room.” I found I didn’t mind the thought of him sleeping it off in my bed. If he did, his scent would linger for days and secretly, I was *more* than okay with smelling him every time I buried my face in my pillows.

“It’s okay. I’m fine.” He yawned, disproving his own words.

“Then help yourself to all available sources of caffeine.” I swept my arm towards the fridge, making him laugh as we walked back to the living room.

Akiva smirked at me, lounging more comfortably in the recliner with his feet on the ground. He’d stolen my seat, and the look on his face absolutely told me he was not about to give it back.

While I could’ve poured my half-full drink on his head and have been very smug about it, I chose the mature route and let him have the spot.

“Here.” I dropped the remote onto his lap. “We have reality tv on demand.” In my opinion that was the holy grail of on demand television, and no other option was needed.

He didn’t complain. By the time I sat down on the far end of the sofa with Indra curling up beside me and leaning on Cian, he was flipping through options.

“May I recommend *Little Children, Large Crowns*?” I asked sweetly.

“You may not,” Akiva replied as he turned on some paranormal investigation show.

“If we’re going to make a battle plan or something, I’m down,” I informed my guests. “Just let me drink this to wake up a little more.” I was sleepy, and needed to ingest more sugar before I could function at an acceptable level.

“Take your time,” Cian said, running his hand through Indra’s hair and over his ears.

It was nice of him to say, but I really only needed a few minutes. I just needed a little bit of rest. Settling onto the sofa more comfortably, I even went so far as to lean against Indra. He didn’t turn me away and Cian looked at us with a fond smile. Only a few minutes.

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CHAPTER 14

Breath tickled my wolf ear and the blanket slid against my arms as I started to move. My head rested on someone's shoulder, and my ears barely picked up the hushed whispers in the room. This was strange; I very decidedly did *not* remember closing my eyes, let alone laying down, or getting a blanket.

Indra breathed out against my ear again, causing it to twitch, and I glanced up at him finally, lips nearly brushing his jaw.

"You're up," Cian's voice was quiet and he still occupied the same spot on the sofa. "You guys fell asleep pretty fast earlier."

"Sorry," I mumbled, Indra's eyes opening at my words. I pulled away, blinking up at the television. "What time is it?"

"A little after four," Akiva replied.

"*Shit*." I loosened my hair from its ponytail and ran my fingers through it. "I'm sorry. You should've woken me up."

Indra only sat up enough to flop over onto Cian, who chuckled and wrapped an arm around him.

"You were both tired," the vampire reasoned. "There was no reason to wake you."

"Yeah there was. We need to make a battle plan or something." My eyes opened and I glared at Akiva. "I get why Cian isn't tired, since he's a vampire, but why aren't *you*?"

"Maybe I napped while you were over there snoring on Indra's shoulder," Akiva challenged.

"I don't believe that."

Akiva shrugged. "Chalk it up to my outstanding constitution, then."

“So is it battle plan time?”

“We’re not leading an army to war,” the blonde pointed out. “I don’t think we need to summon the war council, but yes. There are some things we need to discuss.”

“Before dark?” I pressed. “What if they show up here? If they’re taking vervain, they can get right past Aveline’s wards.” *And my magic.*

“I doubt they’re going to come here and knock down the door.” Cian sounded certain. “They won’t take a fair fight with me.”

Was he really so powerful that he could be so sure?

“Why?” I pressed, wanting answers. “You’re just one vampire.”

Indra’s eyes opened and he studied Cian’s face as the vampire considered his response.

Cian hesitated, and Akiva answered instead. “You sell yourself short, do you not? And us. Lucia does not want to lose any of hers, you know, and she would in that kind of fight.”

That did not answer my question, and I filed my curiosity away for later.

“She’s a problem, though,” Indra said. “Even if she doesn’t want to fight you directly. She can keep us playing her games indefinitely with her power.”

“You said she can cast illusions?” I asked, remembering our conversation earlier.

“And her brother can make himself invisible,” Akiva grumbled. “It’s beyond irritating.”

“Two Empowered vampires?” Surprise colored my words. “Isn’t that really rare?” Normally vampires had no extra, special abilities, but sometimes they just inexplicably *did.* Those vampires were called the Empowered.

My eyes went to Cian. “What about you? Are you Empowered as well?”

He gazed at me, expression melting into pure innocence. “Don’t you think the odds of that are incredibly small?”

“What’s your power, then?”

“My personality.”

I was sure if I rolled my eyes any more forcefully, something would break.

“It’s pain,” he answered finally, a sigh leaving him after his words. “

“I’m sorry-*pain*?” I didn’t understand. “As in, you don’t feel any pain or can negate your own pain or-“

“I can cause others to feel pain.”

“Like voodoo?”

“I don’t play with dolls.”

“Pretty sure if any *bokor* heard you say that, *you’d* be the one in pain,” I said, sure he shouldn’t be insulting the magic of voodoo priests. “So try again. What do you mean cause others to feel pain?”

“I feel like it’s pretty self-explanatory. And you’ll be shocked to know it’s not popular at parties.”

“What *kind* of pain?”

Cian met my gaze. Even at my prodding, he still seemed amused. “You’re asking a lot of questions.”

“I’m *curious*. Is that a crime?”

“If you’re not careful it might be.”

“Can you do it?” I asked. “To me? Just a *little*.”

His eyebrows shot up. “No.”

“Just a *little*? I just want to know what it feels like.”

Akiva coughed into his hand to hide a laugh. “If you are trying to explore your masochistic side, I can do a much better job of assisting you,” the lich said.

“I’m not a masochist, just curious.”

Cian gazed at me, then heaved a sigh. “All right-“ He broke off when I stuck my hand out to him and looked down his nose at it. “I don’t need your hand.”

“What do you need, then?”

He smiled. “Nothing at all.” His eyes met mine and I dropped my hand, intrigued.

Then I felt it. Like a spark, somewhere in my brain, that was only barely there. Like the beginning of a headache or a sore throat. It was both of those, and more, but also…not.

“Is that it?” I asked, trying to trap the feeling but finding it fleeting and transient.

His brows rose and the dull ember of pain brightened very slightly. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he informed me. “If I do anymore, you’re not going to like it much.” The feeling vanished as if it had never been there at all. “It’s not something I’m going to demonstrate further.” His tone was final.

“How bad can you make it?” I blinked, not surprised when he didn’t immediately answer. “Like a headache or a broken arm-“

“George, if I wanted to, I could drive you out of your mind with agony. I could have you on this floor screaming for me to stop within two seconds. I could break Akiva’s arm and make you feel it instead of him. Is that a good enough answer for you?”

“No,” I smiled. “I’m going to need you to demonstrate breaking his arm for me.”

“Kinky,” Akiva smirked. “Let’s do it, Cian.”

“*Any*way.” Cian looked between us, unwilling to humor our jokes. “We need a solution for their gifts. Lucia will see us coming from ten miles away, and we can’t walk into another trap of hers. Until we can have some protection against them, we’re dead in the water.”

“Undead,” Akiva and I said in unison.

Even Indra smiled, not bothering to hide his soft laugh when Cian glanced at him. “They’re funny.”

“Do you have any kitsune friends?” I asked, running my fingers over the edge of my blanket that still covered both Indra and me. “Couldn’t they just negate any kind of vampire illusion?” Kitsune were *masters* of illusion. I very much doubted even an empowered vampire, unless they were very old, could fool a fox.

“I’m not on speaking terms with any kitsune,” Cian admitted, looking to Akiva for his opinion.

The lich shook his head. “I’ve only met one or two. And they didn’t like either of you enough to come help us.”

What a shock.

“Well this is New Orleans,” I reasoned. “There has to be a kitsune or ten around here somewhere. I can try scrying for one.”

Cian grimaced lightly, his hand pausing in Indra’s hair. “I’m not sure that’s a great idea,” he admitted. “You can’t just bring home *any* kitsune. There’s a good chance they won’t support us. And we don’t need a pissed off fox-“

“It’s fine,” I interrupted. “I’m not an *idiot*, and I’m an adult. I can take care of this.”

The vampire shrugged in acquiescence. “All right. If you want to track down a fox for us, then have at it. That would go a long way towards putting a hole in her plan to overthrow me.”

The woman from the cemetery tugged in my memory and I opened my mouth to speak, then paused. “I think…” I didn’t want to get anyone in

trouble, and I didn't know anything about her. "Last night, someone helped me get away. Maybe she was a friend of yours?" At Cian's interested look, I went on. "I don't know what she was. She didn't have teeth like us-" I gestured at Indra and myself. "Or a vampire, but she still had *fangs*."

"Describe them?" Akiva requested.

"All of her teeth were fangs. Not set together like our teeth, but kind of spaced apart. Her eyes were teal. I didn't get much of a chance to see much else about her." I figured that *super hot* was irrelevant.

"That's a water shifter," Indra said. "A mermaid, maybe. Or a siren. Was she attractive?"

"She was *so* hot. Badass hot. Black hair, pale skin. Japanese features, maybe?" Was I rambling? "Around Akiva's height? Definitely *attractive*."

"Are you *bi*?" the lich's voice was tinged with surprise.

"I am so bi. But even if I was straight, she was hot. She impaled the wendigo *with her hand* and if I hadn't been in a fight for my life, I would have *swooned*."

The three of them were looking at me with varying degrees of surprise and I quieted, clearing my throat self-consciously. "I just remember it very well."

"Well she's no friend of ours," Cian said finally, alleviating my anxiety. "We don't know many water shifters."

"Oh." Maybe it had just been chance, then. Whatever it was, I was happy for it.

"If she's of the water, I doubt you'll find her to ask for more help," Akiva put in. "They don't get mixed up in land matters."

He didn't need to tell me that; it was very well known in the preternatural community that those shifters who lived part of their lives in the water tended to keep to their own communities. New Orleans was a rare half-exception, since some of them kept residences in the city, but I doubted any water dweller would care enough to help long term. I'd never met one, only heard stories from my uncle.

"Anyway-I'll take care of looking for the fox," I promised. "And I can give you wards to keep with you, though I'll have to refresh them every few days." I drew my bag to me, fishing around in the small pocket until I found the charms from before. When I'd gotten them back from the three men, my wards on them had been completely depleted, so I knew they'd helped them in their struggles.

Akiva scowled. “You are not giving me the butterfly again.”

I looked at him, face carefully blank. “Sorry, Akiva,” I said in my friendliest tone. “It’s attuned to you now; no take backs.

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CHAPTER 15

Aveline walked in the door a few minutes before two am, looking surprised that the men were still at our house.

"I thought you all would've gone home," she admitted, walking to the kitchen to put down her stuff. "Are we ordering sushi?"

"Not tonight," Akiva laughed, rising smoothly to his feet. "It is time we leave."

Cian agreed with a nod. "There won't be anyone knocking on your door today; I promise."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because *I* am no longer sidetracked," the vampire explained.

Indra brushed by me, fingertips skimming my hand as he smiled. "See you later," he said quietly, going out the door that Akiva had opened. Cian followed with one last wave and closed the door behind him.

Aveline and I went over our wards anyway, and I added my magic to them in order to give them a little something extra. Just in case Cian was wrong.

He wasn't.

Thunder rattled my windows, waking me up with a start. Sitting up straight, I squinted at the rain against the glass before getting up and dragging on a new shirt and yoga pants.

Dragging a map of New Orleans that I'd borrowed from Aveline and a black crystal that dangled from a chain to the kitchen table, I sat down hard and stared at the map. *Goddess* I needed this to work.

Scrying was basic magic taught to all witches, and therefore very easy to ward against. If the kitsune of New Orleans didn't want to be found, I

doubted my junior set up was going to change that.

Sitting down, I leaned over the wooden table with my crystal in one hand while the other smoothed the curling edges of the map. It was only a map of the city; if this didn't work then I might have to look for a bigger one to widen my search.

The other option was admitting failure before I'd made any progress at all, and that was not on my agenda for the day.

Forcing those thoughts from my mind, I gripped the delicate chain tightly in my fingers, drawing the crystal above the surface of the map back and forth.

I took a breath, eyes closing as I leaned forward in my chair over the map.

I'd never met a kitsune, but I *had* met their normal animal counterparts at my mother's house. I let those images linger, memories of my fingers sinking into thick fur brushing at my mind and foxy grins swimming in my vision.

With just a small flick of my wrist, the crystal spun in a circle on its chain. It was a tool for my focus; it was how my magic would find the magic of a kitsune.

The crystal slowed for a moment, then continued to spin.

I frowned, but I was ultimately unsurprised. Whoever my magic had closed in on did not want to be found by a witch. It was understandable. I wasn't good enough at this to go unnoticed.

But it was not acceptable.

My brain went back to my fox memories; the closest I could come to envisioning a real kitsune. One had scratched at our door when I sat in the living room with a sprained wrist, tears rolling down my pudgy cheeks as my mother made us both hot chocolate.

"*You're fine, Georgette*," she'd told me, bringing the mugs back into the room and starting to sit.

A noise at the door had signaled the appearance of a fox, comfortable as you please, and had looked around with an arrogant air about him, all the while his mouth drawn into a grin.

He'd come to me and sat in my lap, cheering me immensely, though he had nipped my fingers when my attention became too heavy or my hands lingered without scratching.

The crystal tugged downward slightly, as if being pulled by an invisible hand. I let my hand fall with it, feeling a small surge of excitement. This kitsune, it seemed, didn't mind that I wanted to find him. Or didn't know.

I held my breath. Just a *bit* more. It hovered over a northern part of the city not too far away. I could maybe go find them-

Without warning, the crystal *jerked.* It looked to me as if someone had grabbed it, and my lips parted in a gasp.

A moment later it landed hard with a *thunk* on the map, and when I went to lift it, the tip stayed, as if magnetized, and would not move. My heart pounded in my chest and I bit my lip.

I could take a hint.

Adjusting my glasses, I peered closely at the spot on the map. It wasn't nearly as good as google maps, but I managed to note down the street and intersection.

Immediately after, I scrambled to my feet, heart rate still rapid and my limbs tingling with adrenaline as I bolted for the door.

I still sucked at finding my way around New Orleans, but thanks to my GPS and the first good luck I'd had in days, it only took me twenty minutes or so to find a parking place on the street near my destination and slam my car into park harshly.

I jumped out, running shoes hitting the pavement hard. Unfortunately for me, there was no half-shifted person walking around with tails floating behind them or a ball of foxfire orbiting their person.

Not to say that there weren't plenty of preternaturals. A few feline shifters stood near a shop, laughing and looking at something on their phones. A vampire stood in the shade, black sunglasses perched on her nose and a lacy umbrella over her head.

I ducked under an awning, knowing the rain was close, and looked around.

MAYBE THIS HADN'T BEEN SUCH A GREAT PLAN, SINCE I NOW HAD NO WAY to *find* the kitsune.

"Are you going in?" One of the feline shifters spoke, her slitted eyes on mine.

"What?" I blinked, drawn from my thoughts. "Going in where?"

She gestured behind me, and I saw I was half blocking the door to a small coffee shop.

“Oh.” I didn’t want to go in. I didn’t like coffee, and I needed to find the kitsune. But the rain was beginning to fall in earnest and maybe I could cast another spell inside to give myself an idea of where to go.

I pushed the door open, holding it until the three girls could enter, and looked around the open building. It smelled bitter, the heavy scents of coffee sitting in my nose unpleasantly. The shop was mostly empty, save for a woman reading in an overstuffed armchair and a man in a corner wearing headphones, fixated on the laptop in front of him.

I did a double take.

He had *fox ears*. Not only that, but two tails dragged the floor behind him, occasionally shifting against the cool tile.

I really *did* have unnatural luck today.

Instead of approaching him immediately, I hesitated. If I walked over to him suddenly, there was a good chance he’d think I was some kind of creep. With that thought I turned and went to the counter, scouring their menu for anything that looked drinkable. A few minutes later I held a steaming plastic cup of green tea in my hand, fingers curled around the warm surface as the heat suffused into my skin. Now I had no more excuses. Now I *had* to talk to him, and my heart jumped at the thought.

Drink in hand, I approached the kitsune.

As I did, I looked him over. The man looked to be in his early twenties like me, and his dark hair shone with auburn highlights in the orange lighting. He was pale, with only a touch of a tan, and his build was lithe. Skinny, instead of *wiry* like Indra. Large orange ears matching the tails at the base of his spine stuck upward through his hair, flicking at any loud noise.

When I was close enough to reach out and touch his table, his head jerked upward, eyes widening when he took in my looming presence.

“Can I help you?” he asked carefully, looking around me as if to see if I was alone.

“Could I talk to you?” I asked rather sharply, trying to think of how to begin.

He lifted his headphones from his human ears and laid them on the table in front of him before speaking. “About…?” The kitsune’s voice was hesitant.

It occurred to me that he was *nothing* like Cian and the others. Not quietly confident, arrogant, or powerful like them.

He was *normal.* My stomach clenched as I looked at him. Was I okay with dragging this man into my problems? He wasn't what I'd been expecting. He wasn't awe-inspiring and power didn't tinge the air round him like I had expected. The most outstanding thing about him was the set of headphones that glowed with purple LED light.

"Nothing bad," I promised. "I kind of need some help, actually." I hovered where I stood, unsure of what to do.

Finally, the fretting fox nodded to the chair across from him and pushed it back with his foot. "Sure. Yeah-that's fine." His light voice was unsure, just like the rest of him.

I sat, smiling, and adjusted my bag on my lap. "I'm George." It was probably better to tell him my name, in an attempt at calming his nerves.

"Merric," he replied, closing his laptop. "Have we met before? Do you work with my dad?"

Shaking my head, I answered. "No, nothing like that. I umm. I scried for you-well, a kitsune, not you specifically. Because I need help."

His brows rose. "Really? You scried for me?" Surprise tinged his tone and I sat back in my chair, unconvinced.

If he was so inexperienced that he couldn't tell there was magic hunting for him, could he dispel a vampire's illusions? And what if we needed him to fight?

"Yeah," I said at last. "My friends and I are having some trouble that seems right up a kitsune's alley." I flashed him an amicable smile, which he returned after a moment.

"You mean-tricks?" he reasoned. "Illusions? Things like that?"

I nodded. "Yeah, things *exactly* like that. Can you break someone else's illusions?"

He considered it, drumming his fingers over the silver of his laptop as he thought. "Yes," he said finally. "Yeah, I can kind of do that. Not against most other foxes; I only have two tails." He smiled cheekily as his tails waved in the air behind him, long and white-tipped and unlike any real fox's tail.

"She's not a fox," I answered. "She's a vampire."

He sobered, curious. "And she can cast illusions? That seems weird."

“I don’t know too much about her,” I admitted. “But she’s trying to hurt my friends and me.” I gripped my coffee cup and met his eyes again.

“That sounds shitty.” He visibly considered his options, tails still waving. “You just need a kitsune to break a certain illusion or…?”

We’d discussed this. We’d discussed just needing a kitsune on call to come help us when we tracked down the hideout of the revenge-seekers.

I explained this to him, while leaving out the reason for the conflict, and he nodded along.

“I don’t have to *fight* anyone, right?” he asked quickly when I was done.

Immediately I shook my head. While I was sure it would’ve been *nice* to have a combat ready kitsune at our backs, Merric didn’t seem to fit that bill. “Promise. Just some illusion breaking, then you’d be out of there. And we’ll pay you.” That had been Cian’s idea, as he doubted any kitsune would help us out of the kindness of their vulpine hearts.

“No that’s okay.” He held his hand up slightly. “I’d feel bad. You don’t need to pay me to help you out.” He was cautiously smiling once more. “Oh-you want my number?” He reached into his pocket, fumbling for his phone as I watched.

“Sure.” I really needed to find a different kitsune. Nothing against Merric, but he did not inspire confidence. He gave me his number and I shot him a text with my name on it. “Thanks so much, Merric.” I forced myself to smile like he really was helping me.

The two-tailed fox was nodding. “This’ll be cool,” he said as I got to my feet. “I’ve never done anything like this before.” He reached out suddenly, long fingers curling around my wrist. “You *will* call me, right?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” It wasn’t quite a lie. If I couldn’t find another fox, I’d definitely call him. “See you around, Merric.”

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CHAPTER 16

I did not find another fox.

After meeting with Merric, I tried to scry for any kitsune in the area again. When that didn't work, I got a bigger map. The crystal never pulled, no matter how much power or will I channeled into it.

At the end of the second day of looking, I wanted to break the crystal and tear the map. My hair was tangled with how much I'd been pulling at it, and a few hours after dawn Aveline had taken pity on me and tried to scry for him as well. She'd come back in from the yard, hair plastered to her skull, and informed me that she couldn't find a damn thing.

Finally, two days after meeting with Merric and getting more and more anxious, I decided to ask Marin. I couldn't sit and scry *forever*, and I didn't want to wait around for someone to gift me another fancy silver dagger. Marin had been in the city for a long time. If anyone could help me, it would be her. I'd even settle for advice on how to get around the fox-magic that prevented me to find any of Merric's kin.

Aveline and I were lucky that no one had come knocking; Indra had texted me that Akiva was attacked once by Lucia's brother, then again by another vampire. Both times however, they had been unable to retaliate because of his invisibility and her far-reaching illusions.

He'd also told me that Cian had started looking for other solutions, since I hadn't been able to find a helpful kitsune that we could count on.

That last part irritated me. It had only been *days* since I'd started looking, and what was I supposed to do if they didn't want to be found? Was I supposed to get a globe, throw my crystal at it, and travel to that spot immediately in hopes of bagging myself a kitsune?

I was worried that if I asked that question, I might not like the answer. Not to mention, Cian's faith in me was not inspiring, to say the least.

Slamming my SUV into park, I jumped out onto the sidewalk, eyes fixed on Marin's storefront. It was late in the evening, so I figured she'd be there and open.

I was right. The door to *Le Renard Qui Rit* was open, and Marin was rearranging a display of crystals on the far shelf. I didn't knock, but Zahir yipped a greeting and stood to stretch on the countertop.

Marin looked over, a slow smile finding her lips. "George," she greeted. "I was wondering about you. I read for you again after you left the other night and it was not very encouraging."

"I should've gone home like you said," I agreed. "But it ended up okay for the most part."

"Come to ask about that job?" She raised a brow, catching me off guard.

"Would you really hire me?" The thought sidetracked me, and I made my way to her, accepting the box that she held out for me.

"Part time," she agreed. "I could use another witch to help me run the shop. Especially if you'd agree to read for my customers. I know quite a few people that would come in for a summoner's tarot skills."

"I could do that." She took a crystal from the box, adding it to her display.

"But it was not your motivation for coming to see me tonight," she smiled. "I would think by now you wouldn't be wandering the Quarter in the dark. At least, not alone."

I hadn't thought to bring anyone else. Aveline was working. Would Indra or Akiva have come with me if I'd asked? I figured Cian was much too busy with *Vampire King Things* to take the time out of his day for me.

"Are you and your cards fighting again?"

"No. I haven't read for myself today," I admitted. "I wanted to ask you something, if I could." I hesitated, watching her finish with the display and giving her the box when she reached for it.

"Ask," the witch invited, beckoning me to the back alcove once more and taking a seat.

I sat across from her comfortably, leaning back in the chair. I saw her eyes find the words on my shirt-*Bihexual*, scrolled under a multicolored witch hat-and her mouth quirked into a half smile.

“There’s a vampire trying to kill me. *Well*. A vampire, her vampire friends, a wendigo, and I really hope no one else,” I began, trying to figure out the most succinct way to explain the situation.

“Because you helped Cian overthrow Gavin out in the bayou and he was beloved by his vampires,” Marin supplied. “I can’t say I’m completely unaware. But if you’re here to ask me to help you with them, then you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Because you don’t want to get in the middle of it?” I assumed.

Her small smirk grew. “Because this is not at a point where I feel I should need to intervene. I’d prefer you didn’t let it get that far, George.”

What did *that* mean? Surely she wasn’t so powerful that her magic had those kinds of repercussions. Wouldn’t she be doing something else, like running a coven, if she were that strong?

My face must’ve shown my confusion, because Marin chuckled.

“I’m not here to ask you for that, though now I wonder if maybe I *should* be trying to get more on your good side by bringing you baked goods,” I laughed, only half joking.

Her eyes still sparkled and she crossed her legs gracefully. Zahir jumped into her lap, prompting Marin to smooth her hands along his fur. “Then what do you need from me?”

“I’m looking for a fox,” I said, and immediately her smile fell. “That bad? I thought for sure there would be kitsune in New Orleans. We need the help of one.”

“Have you scried for kitsune?” Marin inquired.

I nodded. “I found one, too. He was *nice.* Younger than me, and that’s saying something. He said he’d help, but…” I shook my head when Merric’s smile flashed in the forefront of my mind. “I was hoping for someone who could keep themselves safe, if things went sideways. I don’t want anyone getting hurt because of me.”

Marin reached out, black-polished nails running along a large, jagged crystal that sat on the table. When she pressed her finger against it, light flared from within, drawing my attention.

“I don’t think you should look for the help of a kitsune,” she said at last. “There are other solutions to your problem. Is your vampire not looking for such resources?” her dark eyes flicked upwards to meet mine and I sat back with a huff.

That hit a bit close to home, and my voice was cold when I said, “I don’t need *him* to come up with something else. The kitsune was my idea.”

“And you think if your idea doesn’t work then you will be less to him?” she assumed.

I hated that she was *right*.

“Take the blow to your pride and move on,” she advised. “Kitsune aren’t good to rely on.”

“That’s prejudiced,” I argued. “They’re just like the rest of us. I’m part werewolf; does that mean you should be afraid of me when the full moon pops up?” My temper rose slightly, eyes burning bright.

She held my gaze, not impressed.

“I will take being prejudiced over being outsmarted by a fox,” she said at last. “What kind of kitsune is the one you spoke to?”

“What?” I thought back to our conversation. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask-“

“Why not? Do you even know what to look for? Which kitsune are all right to trust and which should be avoided?” When I didn’t speak, she went on. “Call off his help and swallow your pride, George. A kitsune’s help is not the avenue you should seek.”

Well obviously she was going to be no help at all.

When I looked down, hair falling around my face, and swallowed my angry words, Marin’s gaze softened. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings,” she promised. “Nor am I trying to undermine you. You’re young, idealistic, and you haven’t yet been burned enough to know better. Please do me a favor and let your vampire handle whatever it is you need the kitsune for, all right?”

That was not alright, but I nodded once. “Fine. I’ll talk to him and see what he suggests.” That wouldn’t hurt, I supposed. Though I wouldn’t tell him *everything* Marin had said.

“Thanks” I sighed, getting to my feet. Marin watched me, not moving.

“You can stay, if you like,” she said. “My shop is open to you and you wouldn’t be the first witch to find distraction here.”

I don’t need distraction, I wanted to howl. *I need a kitsune!* But I only nodded. “I’ll be back, if that’s okay. I should go home before it gets too late.” Aveline would be ticked if I stayed out late, after the last time.

“Be safe,” Marin warned, hand stroking over Zahir’s ears. “And actually *go home* this time, maybe?”

Again I nodded, this time more fervently. “I learned my lesson last time.”

My phone rang and I put a hand over my bag. “Sorry-I have to take this.” She looked at me, eyebrows knit and drawn downward. It was Indra’s ringtone. “Goodnight, Marin.”

She called her own goodbye as I walked quickly out of the shop, pulling my phone out and looking at the screen. Sure enough, Indra was calling me.

I rolled my eyes, marveling at his imperfect timing, and brought the phone up to my ear. “Hey, Indra. Sorry, but I-“

“*George?”* His voice was panicked and I stopped walking. “*George-you have to come. It’s Cian-“*

“What happened?” I demanded, chest tightening. Would I need to call Merric since I still had no other options?

“*He’s-he’s hurt. Akiva too. Please, George. I don’t know how much longer I can run from them*-“

“*Hurt*?” I whispered, feeling numb. I looked back at Marin’s shop. Would she help me *now*? “How bad? Indra-“

“*Please*!” he begged. “*I need your help to get out of here.*” He sounded terrified, and his breathing was heavy in my ear.

“Where are you?” I was already close to my car, and didn’t register the woman leaning against the side, handles of a bag hooked over her fingers.

“*There’s a warehouse. It’s-“* he rattled off an address. “*I’ll try to text it to you. Please-please hurry!”*

“Okay! Okay I just need a second-“ the phone went dead.

Now I looked up, and slid to a stop when I saw the stranger at my car.

Only-it wasn’t exactly a stranger.

The woman from the other night was leaning against the silver paint job, A paper bag swinging from her fingers.

“You…” I trailed off. “You’re-“

“George!” A voice behind cut me cut me off, sounding happy, carefree, and *familiar*.

The woman didn’t look towards the voice, even as *Merric* slowed beside me, a happy smile on his face.

I didn’t have time for *either* of them.

“Hey! I’ve been calling you for like-“

“I don’t have time for this!” I half shifted from fear, seeing surprise flit across the kitsune’s face. “Sorry-I’m sorry, both of you. My friends are in

danger. I don’t know-“

“Well I can come. I said I would, remember?” Merric’s smile had only fallen *slightly* in the face of potential mortal peril.

I was shaking my head. “It’s too dangerous. We’ll be alone. There are vampires-“

The door to my SUV opened, making both of us look towards the woman.

“What are you doing?” I asked, blood racing.

“Opening the door for you to be polite. Give me your keys.” She reached a hand out to me.

“What?”

“I thought you were in a hurry.” *She* didn’t seem to be, but she was right.

I hesitated, but finally fumbled with my keys until she took them from me and gestured to the front seat. “Foxes sit in the back,” she told the kitsune, but I was shaking my head.

“No. It’s really dangerous-“

“It’s an *adventure*,” Merric argued, opening the back door and sliding past me to get in.

The engine turned over and I jumped into the passenger seat.

“Where are we going?” the water shifter asked, bright teal gaze cutting to mine.

“What?”

She didn’t answer.

Oh-*oh*. I waved my phone wildly, turning it on to read the text Indra had just sent. “It says-Seventy-two Winfield Avenue. Do you need-“She threw my car into drive and sped out in front of another car.

“I know where that is,” the woman said, shaking long hair back from her heart shaped face.

We were quiet, then, my heart trying to pound its way out of my ribs as my hands shook.

Merric fiddled with his tails, the fur occasionally sliding against my arm.

“You can’t be like that,” the water shifter said simply, eyes on the road as she broke every traffic law in the state. “You’ll be no help to anyone if you let yourself fall apart before we even get there.”

I glared at her, but she wasn't done, and added. "Though, I'm not sure what you think you'll accomplish if that night in the cemetery was you at your best."

"She's kind of mean," Merric leaned forward, attitude light in the face of my panic. "You know each other?"

He asked me, but the panic in my chest wouldn't let me answer. All I could do was try to keep breathing.

The woman glanced at me, then answered. "I saved her from being a wendigo's midnight snack. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm Merric. She asked me for some help breaking through illusions." He looked proud as he said it.

The woman's eyes narrowed and she looked to me accusingly. "*Him*?" she asked. "Don't you know a kitsune can't work illusions until they have *three* tails? The best he's going to do is chomp on their ankles."

Merric made an indignant sound, but sat back.

Great. I hadn't even done *that* right. Now I had a useless kitsune in the back who was probably going to get *killed* when we got there.

I felt like crying.

Pain made me gasp and I opened my eyes to find the woman's fingers twined with mine, nails digging lightly into my hand. "I said calm down," she reminded me, loosening her grip but not letting go. "We'll be there in a minute."

"What's your name?" I whispered, figuring it would be polite to know who she was before we both got killed.

"Yuna."

"I'm George."

"Tell me then, *George*. Why are we about to pull up to an abandoned warehouse-in vampire territory-in the *dark*?"

Merric made a surprised sound in the back seat.

"My friends," I whispered. "I think-I think they're dead. Or about to be."

"You'll have to point them out to me." She swung into a side street, making my tires squeal. The houses and businesses were transforming to larger buildings, and my ears pricked towards the window as I tried to make them out. "You good for anything, fox, or are you just going to get eaten?"

Merric bit his lip, though I noticed a distinct lack of fear on his face. "I'll cheer you on and uh-I can at least point out when there's some

illusioning going on.”

Yuna rolled her eyes, stomped on the gas pedal, and nearly knocked over a garbage can.

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CHAPTER 17

Thanks to her driving, we were at the warehouse in only a few more minutes. As soon as she threw my SUV into park, I jumped out, landing hard, and searched for any sign of life or a struggle.

But there was nothing.

The whisper of metal caught my attention, and Yuna drew the katana from the sheath on her back, holding it at her side. I had been so caught up that I hadn't even noticed the woman had a *sword* on her.

"Is that a *sword*?" Merric yipped, veering away from her to stand beside me.

She glared at him, but didn't reply. Instead she pushed her hair over her shoulder and gestured for us to follow her.

We did, the fox and I staying a few steps behind the black haired woman as she approached the large concrete building. I couldn't hear anything, other than Merric's unquiet steps, but stuck close to Yuna just the same.

"What does your friend smell like?" Yuna breathed, looking over the dark building. The only source of brightness was the orange glow coming from a single light over a slightly-ajar door.

"A hellhound?" I offered uncertainly. Should I say that he smelled of comfort? That he smelled faintly of cologne and *always* just a bit like Cian?

She sighed but went to the door, putting a hand against it just as a low, agonized call sounded from inside.

That sounded like Indra.

I gasped, hand going to my mouth, and both of them looked to me.

“*What*?” Yuna asked.

“What do you mean *what?* That sounded like my friend!” Without waiting I pushed past her, shoving the door open and allowing the bit of light from outside to filter into the building.

It was empty.

Only trash littered the floor, and graffiti decorated the walls, from what I could see.

Yuna hissed and grabbed my wrist, pulling me to her. “There was no sound!” she snapped.

I shook my head, already summoning *The Devil* to my hand. “I *heard* him,” I promised.

“No, I’m with the Cecealia,” Merric said with a flick of his hand showing he meant Yuna. He smiled nervously as he stepped into the warehouse, ears flat on his head. “No one called out or anything.”

She looked at him, surprised by his words, but didn’t speak

“I *promise you*, I heard him. I’m not *lying*-“

“Give me your phone,” Yuna ordered brusquely.

I glared at her. “Why? This isn’t the time! My friends are in trouble, Yuna! If you aren’t going to help-“

She lunged, hitching her sword under her arm so that she could simultaneously grab me by my shirt and dig her hand into my pocket to wrestle my phone from me.

Yuna succeeded, while Merric watched rather unhelpfully, and swiped the screen. Her brows furrowed.

“Where’s the text your friend sent you?” she demanded, still holding onto my shirt and preventing me from running further into the building.

“It’s the top text. It’s from Indra.”

She glanced at me, then looked back to my phone.

“No, it’s not.”

“Let me see?” Merric held his hand out to her and she dropped my phone into his palm.

He lifted it up, the glow lighting up his face and bathing it in a blue light. The uneven light gave his eyes the look of burning bright yellow, instead of their normal muddy brown.

Finally he handed my phone back to me gingerly, and looked at Yuna.

“There was no call.” Merric’s words were slow. The woman still wasn’t letting go and held my gaze with her own. “And no message.”

“What?” My lips felt numb. “No, that can’t be right.“

The door slammed behind Merric, prompting him to stumble into us with a yelp.

It also threw the building into a near pitch-black that my eyes could not penetrate.

“Clever Cecealia.” The voice echoed in the room, a low purr, and finally Yuna let go of my shirt. “Too bad you did not notice sooner.”

I swallowed around my racing heart, fingers clenched on the glass of my phone. Fear like cold fingers trailed down my spine.

“Where’s Indra?” I called, voice shaky. “And the others?”

Someone laughed; fingers brushed my arm and I gasped. Merric squawked as I stumbled into him, jumping back from me.I was panicking now, eyes scanning the darkness like I’d magically be able to see clearly. *Calm down, calm down*, I chanted in my head, trying to wrestle my heart under control.

“They’re home, I should think. Looking for ways to find me.” Her voice echoed through the room, seeming to come from everywhere around me. I should’ve paid attention to Marin’s advice and gone home.

They had never been here at all.

The revenge-seeking vampires had lured me into a trap.

Light suddenly flooded the room and Yuna yelled a warning that I was too slow to heed. The fully shifted wendigo was beside me and he screamed, knocking me to the floor easily. Why wasn’t he *dead?* Yuna had put a hand through his chest but that apparently hadn’t slowed him down for long. Spittle flew from his wide jaws as he roared directly in my face, causing a shriek to ascend my throat as my heart nearly stopped from fear.

Yuna yelled, having found an enemy of her own while Merric backed towards the door, ears flattened and fear plain on his face.

This had been such a bad idea. I hadn’t wanted to lead him into this kind of danger.

There were *nine* figures in the room, though most of them had found comfortable seats as if they were watching a show. Even if I could take the wendigo and Yuna could fight off two of them, there was no way we could fight them all. We were surprised and outnumbered.

We were dead.

A woman stood in the middle of the room, fiercely beautiful in a cropped leather jacket, red top, and leather pants tucked into boots. Her skin

was a rich mahogany that managed to look lovely in the unforgiving white lights, and her eyes shone like rubies.

“Do you think they will mourn you?” she asked as Jameson tackled me to the ground, fangs snapping for my neck as I shoved at the bone of his face. It was a real shame Yuna hadn’t killed him.

“No!” I yelled. “I barely *know them!*”

“I think you underestimate your relationship. Cian appealed to me on your behalf; tried to convince me it was only coincidence you were there and that, after all, you had not killed any of us.”

I shoved hard, snarling in the face of the wendigo and heaving him off of me so I could roll to my feet.

“But that means he cares for you; and while you’ve proven you’re no threat to me, it will serve me to kill you, just to see his face when I toss your heart at his doorstep.” She laughed, like it was the most novel idea in the world.

Yuna stepped closer to me, her sword bloody. “We can’t fight them,” she hissed.

“I know. I’m so sorry-“

“Shut up.” I glanced at her, but didn’t find fear there in her expression; only resolute anger.

Merric, on the other hand, looked like he was ready to crawl out of his skin to escape the vampires.

“Fox,” Yuna snapped, grabbing him and jerking her chin upward. He looked at her face, then the ceiling. He stared at her, eyes wide, then recognition hit Merric.

“What? Yeah-I can-“

“Then do it.”

In the next instant, the lights had gone out, like someone had flipped a switch.

Even vampires couldn’t see in complete darkness.

“Run!” Yuna yelled, pushing me hard.

Merric grabbed my arm, jerking me around.

The wendigo screamed as we managed to duck into the nearest hallway as that light blinked once-hopefully Merric’s doing-and without a thought I ran left at the intersection.

Yuna paused behind us, and over my harsh pants I could hear her say something under her breath. The building shook, the doorway we’d come in

from crumbling to become impassible.

Merric yelped again, losing his grip on my hand, but when I whirled to find out where he'd gone, I instead saw the gleam of bone and snapping fangs. Jameson had made it through the door before Yuna had sealed it. The woman herself was nowhere in sight. Neither was Merric. Fear curled my stomach and I skipped backward, mind blanking on anything except getting out of there.

The lights strobed on, presenting me with a path before going out again.

My body throbbed from the wendigo throwing me to the ground, and I could feel the trickle of blood on my elbows. I didn't stop to look. I was sure Jameson would do worse than scuff my elbows if he caught me again.

Finally, the lights came on-and stayed on-leading me to see that the door in front of me was ajar to the outside. *Finally*. We just needed to get to the car, somehow, and get *out* of here. Vampires were fast, but hopefully we'd had enough of a head start-

Jameson was there suddenly, swiping his arm outward and sending me flying through the air. I landed with a thud, the air knocked from my lungs, and could only lay there and look up at the wendigo.

"*Stupid witch,*" his words were garbled and spittle dripped to the floor from his bony fangs. "*Should've just died the first time. I'll make it hurt, so Lucia gets to hear you scream*."

My eyes narrowed, fixing on a shape over his shoulder. Merric had walked out of one of the rooms in the hallway, casual as could be.

But he was different. *Very* different. Dark circles were prominent under his eyes, his skin paler like he'd suddenly lost the tan I'd seen him with. Golden-yellow eyes *glowed* and his lips were parted in a foxy, sharp toothed grin.

His ears stuck out from his head in his half-shifted form still, but now they were white.

But that wasn't the most shocking thing about him.

What had me utterly bewildered were the nine tails at his waist.

What the fuck?

Before Jameson could turn, his hand was on the wendigo's shoulder, making the creature whirl around with a very audible snarl.

But Merric caught his hand, his smile spreading. "Don't ruin my fun," he said simply, hand gripping the wendigo's bony face.

The wendigo started to scream. His shifting faded, and Merric adjusted his grip so he could hold Jameson's jaws between his fingers.

His eyes never left Jameson's face, even as the man yelled and clawed weakly at his grip, having completely lost his grip on his shift.

But Merric only *smiled*.

As I stood, Jameson's knees buckled. He hit the floor hard, but didn't seem to notice. I walked around them, stopping at Merric's shoulder to look into the wendigo's human face. Holy *shit*. My body felt cold as I looked down at the wendigo and a tremor went through my hands.

Blood poured from his nose, mouth, ears, and eye sockets, choking his screams.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, but Merric didn't answer.

Seconds later he released the wendigo, letting him drop to the floor unmoving.

He was dead.

I reached out, hand close to one of the bright-white tails at Merric's spine. "Merric-you're-"

He whirled suddenly, pinned me against the wall effortlessly with one arm, and brought one finger to his lips in a 'hushing' motion. "Don't ruin my fun," he whispered, his eyes fading to *black*. "Do you know what I am?"

"You're a void kitsune," I breathed.

He grinned, tails rippling.

Tires screeched and the horn of my car blared.

Merric didn't move. "The vampires," I looked towards the hall we came from, but he laughed lightly.

"They'll be chasing their own tails for the next hour," the kitsune promised. "And we won't tell the Cecealia; this is our secret for now, isn't it?"

"If you want it to be." I didn't know what else to say as he pressed harder against my collarbone. I swallowed back the coppery taste in my throat, trying not to let my fear show on my face.

His grin was wide, seeming unnaturally stretched across his face, like someone was pulling the edges of his mouth outward.

"Don't look for another fox," he suggested. "Because I won't let you find one."

It clicked, then. The reason that I hadn't been able to scry for anyone but him.

"It was you. You interrupted my spell."

"Your cousin's too." He seemed happy to add to his accomplishments. Then he pulled away, and suddenly he was back to the Merric from five minutes ago. Wide eyed, innocent, orange-eared and two-tailed.

Yuna appeared at the end of the hallway, exasperated. "Come on you two!" she snapped. "it's time to go!"

"Sorry!" Merric grabbed me and pulled me after her. "I almost passed out when George took out that wendigo."

"*George* did?" She glanced towards Jameson's body, opening her mouth to speak, but Merric tripped, stumbled into her, and drew her attention. "Watch it, fox!" she spat.

"Sorry Yuna!" He looked at me and winked, like we were both part of this inside joke and found it hilarious.

She booked it past us, going back to the driver's side and getting in while I slid into the passenger seat. Merric gracelessly fell into the back, and thankfully his rambling apologies seemed to have distracted her from the wendigo's death.

She threw my car into drive and tore out of the parking lot like the devil was chasing us out.

Which, honestly, was a pretty good analogy.

The ride was silent, in spite of the heavens that encircled us. I had no idea what to say or who to say it to. Merric was busying himself on his phone, back to the haphazard and good natured kitsune I'd been fooled into thinking he was.

Kitsune were tricksters, and Merric was no exception. Perhaps Marin had been right.

"I brought you your clothes," Yuna said. "From the cemetery."

I blinked at her, bemused. "Really? That's…very nice of you. Thank you."

She shrugged one shoulder like it was nothing. "It was only because I wanted to actually meet you. I saw you before you shifted that night when you were struggling." She added, like an insult.

Merric's tail brushed my arm, making me flinch. "You were watching me?"

In the rearview mirror I saw the kitsune grin, his eyes flashing yellow once more.

“Just that night. Now that I’ve met you, I can absolutely confirm you’re good at getting yourself into shit situations,” the Cecealia went on. “Having a vampire cast that far of an illusion to get you to show up? Resorting to the help of a *two-tailed fox*?” My eyes found the silently giggling kitsune in the back seat. Two tailed fox my *ass.*

“Do you want to go on a date with me?”

Her words caught me off guard and I was sure I had misheard. She hadn’t exactly been that nice to me tonight, and hadn’t at all acted as if she was interested in me romantically.

“What?” I asked, eyes wide. “Go on a date-“

“With me. You *owe* me,” she reasoned. “So actually, two dates.”

“That’s so hot,” Merric whispered conspiratorially from the back seat.

“Shut up, fox.”

“Merric,” the kitsune corrected.

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes.

“C’mon-be nice,” I begged them, my words more for Merric than her.

He lifted his hands in surrender, grinning like a fool. “I’m *always* nice and I think the both of you are amazing. Hey-can one of your dates include me? We’ll go get dinner and go see *When Couches Attack*-“

“Yes,” Yuna interrupted. “But only because of the light trick you did.” She paused, then went on. “And because I want to see that movie.”

“I’m sorry.” I was getting some of my stability back. “You both want to go see *When Couches Attack*? Is that even *real*?”

“It’s incredibly real,” Merric promised me.

“Tomorrow night?” Yuna pressed. “Unless either of you have any pressing danger to attend to?” she glared at me and I quickly shook my head.

“No-I mean yeah, I can do that.”

“Can we meet at your house George?” Merric asked *sweetly.*

That seemed like a bad idea. What would Aveline think? What would she *say?*

“Sure,” I agreed. “We can…absolutely meet at my house.”

Yuna was quick in her goodbyes. After driving back to the quarter, the water shifter traded numbers through all three of our phones, then excused

herself.

Merric hung around. Naturally.

“I like her,” he said, and when I looked at him I found him back to his nine-tailed, half shifted form. “She’s a Cecealia, but I’m not sure you know what that is.” He tipped his head, tone full of patience. “Do you, George?”

Hesitantly, I shook my head.

“It means she’s a *predator*.” He snapped his teeth playfully. “Maybe she wants to eat you up, huh?”

“What do *you* want?” I asked, keeping my tone light. Nine tailed kitsune were rare; legends held that it took hundreds of years for a kitsune to obtain nine, if they did at all. Was he as strong as Akiva? *As Cian?*

Was he stronger?

“To have fun,” Merric admitted. “It was lucky I caught your little spell the other day, wasn’t it? And that Marin didn’t scare you off of me.” His eyes danced at my look of surprise. “Though she did try her best.”

“You know her?”

His grin widened, but he didn’t answer.

“I’ll help you,” he said after a moment, two of his long tails wrapping around my waist and urging me to step closer. Here, in the dark and without anyone around us, I wondered if he would kill me. Would I be able to defend myself? The wendigo hadn’t, and I couldn’t hold a candle to Jameson. No one was here to see. No one was here to help. “But I’ll ask something from you in return,” the kitsune went on.

“Then maybe I’ll find another kitsune,” I whispered through numb lips.

His smirk turned arrogant. “No you won’t. And you need me for Lucia. She’s strong; she *learned* her illusions from a kitsune, after all.” His tails had caused my shirt to ride up and now the fur slid like silk against my skin.

“So what do you *want*?” I asked again, trying to choose my words carefully.

“I don’t know yet,” the fox admitted. “I like to collect debts; yours will be the centerpiece on my trophy shelf. The debt of a *Levasseur summoner*. Such a lucky *coincidence*, don’t you think?”

Just as his tails tightened around my body, they pulled away, fur sliding against my skin. It felt intimate, but I kept that thought to myself. Magic tingled in the absence of his fur, as if he’d left some of his own power on my skin.

“See you tomorrow,” he said, shoulders ducked almost shyly, though his eyes hadn’t yet gone back to their normal muddy brown. “Really excited to come over to your house and go see that movie with you. Maybe we’ll make it a *thing*.”

I couldn’t help but think how that sounded vaguely like a threat.

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CHAPTER 18

"Wait-*wait*-" Aveline pointed her pretzel at me accusingly. "You're going on a date with someone *else*? Not Cian or Akiva or Indra?"

I glanced at her, glowering, as I continued to put on my makeup. "It's not like that," I said. "It's not a *real* date or anything."

My cousin scoffed and gestured to me again. "It's not? Then why are you spending so damn long on your eyeliner?"

Pausing, I examined my face in the mirror. My light blue eyes were framed in heavy, winged liner, my lips dark burgundy, and I had just finished applying dark eyeshadow. My hair was down around my shoulders and curled loosely.

"I could change my shirt," I offered finally, gesturing to the tightly fitting black shirt with moons over a howling wolf. True to form, the scrolling text of today read: *Wolves don't lose sleep over the opinions of sheep.* I wore the shirt untucked over black denim shorts, and classic converse.

Aveline leveled her gaze at me, unamused. "What're they like?" she asked, finishing off the soft pretzel and leaning her hip on the doorframe to prevent my likely escape. "I would think they'd really have to be *something* to distract you from the three lovers laid at your feet already."

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed my phone and shoved it into my pocket.

"It's not a date," I told her firmly. "They're just acquaintances. Hell-*all* of them are acquaintances. I haven't even known anyone here for more than ten days."

Nodding sagely, Aveline still didn’t move. “Acquaintances you want to fuck. I get it, girl.”

Exasperated, I pushed her out of the door. It was after five thirty; I needed to mentally prepare myself. I still hadn’t told Aveline the details of the night before-I doubted she’d be thrilled.

“I’m staying in tonight,” my cousin said as we went towards the kitchen. “So, you know.”

I threw her a puzzled look.

“I don’t want to hear you getting frisky in the living room or something. Your room only-“

“I’m not getting *frisky* with them-“

The doorbell rang. Who was here when it was still too early?

But then again, from the way Yuna liked to show up and surprise me, I could easily assume it was her.

My cousin went to the door, throwing it open with a grin. “You are *not* what I expected,” she informed Merric, who stood sheepishly on the doorstep in snug fitting jeans and a v neck.

He looked sheepish, bushy red ears twitching. “Sorry? Is it because I’m not that tall?”

Aveline glanced at me over her shoulder and I only smiled beatifically. “Hi Merric,” I greeted politely, feeling more than a little *on edge.*

He smiled sweetly at me and waved.

“Sorry I’m early-I thought it’d take me longer to get here,” the kitsune explained. “The uber guy was really fast.” He stepped in the door when Aveline moved aside, and my cousin closed the door after him with another confused glance at my face.

I couldn’t really tell her the reality of the situation, now could I?

“Your house is so cool.” He made quick work of exploring the living room, kitchen, and stuck his head curiously out the side door. Then he looked to us with another grin wide on his lips.

“Thanks. Two tails, huh?” She looked dismissively towards his waving red tails, and it occurred to me that he seemed to *always* be in his half-shifted form.

Well-fake-half-shifted form.

“Yeah,” Merric laughed good-naturedly. “I’m only twenty-three, so I’m only one tail behind the curve.”

My intuition screamed at me that he hadn't been twenty-three in a very long time.

"Did George tell you about our adventure last night?" Merric went on, unbidden. He smiled at Aveline, who nodded.

"A little bit, yeah. She said she and some new friends got into some vampire related trouble, but it wasn't a big deal."

I begged him silently, eyes wide, to keep his mouth *shut*. It was easier to keep Aveline in the dark when she wasn't interested in the real story.

Thankfully, Merric nodded along with her. "Pretty much," he agreed. "It was so much *fun.* I never do stuff like that-I thought we might die." As if that was a selling point for our adventures.

Not to mention, he had never been in any danger at all.

Aveline gave him a confused look, then turned back to me with raised brows.

"Can we go outside?" Merric asked, phrasing the question towards me. "Not for anything *particular*. I just want to see what the yard looks like, since you have one but from the front it doesn't *look like* you have one."

"Sure," I said quickly, heading to the side door and opening it. "Be right back, Av."

"Whatever." She leaned against the kitchen table, still bemused.

The kitsune followed me outside, then brushed past me to the bottom of the stairs and out into the narrow yard. The moon was over half full-something I always kept an eye on-and bright light illuminated the yard along with the lights from the neighboring houses. The air outside was cool, though still held the threat of rain. Even the light breeze had the scent of storms on it.

When I looked at Merric again, he was smirking.

"Why did you really want to come out here?" I asked coolly, hand curled at my hip.

"What's been here?" the fox asked, his entire manner having done a one-eighty. Now he strode to the privacy fence, running his fingers over the wood.

"Excuse me?"

He looked back at me, eyes narrowed impatiently. One tail flicked in my direction. "It wasn't a difficult question, *George*."

"Nothing? Av and I come out here to take care of the herbs-"

"No. That's not what I mean. *What else*?"

“The neighbor’s *cat*?” My voice rose slightly.

Merric very visibly rolled his eyes, dissatisfied. “Don’t play coy with me,” he warned. Then very suddenly, he grinned, the look lighting up his pale face. “Or *do*. If you want to play with a fox, then by all means.” He swept his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. “Though you might not be quite at my level.”

He was both infuriating and terrifying at the same time.

I let out a breath, held his gaze, but didn’t answer.

He walked around the yard a second longer, rubbing his hand over another part of the fence as if wiping something off. I had no idea what he was doing, but when he returned to where I still stood on the deck, he was back to his perfect façade; eyes muddy brown once more.

“We can go back in now. Thanks so much for letting me look around, George.” His tone, too, was the Merric I had believed him to be, but the look in his eyes was goading.

I didn’t speak, but I opened the door once more to let us back in.

“How many kinds of herbs are you growing?” Merric asked loudly, his voice marveling. “Eleven? Twelve?”

Aveline was sitting in the recliner and smirked. “Fourteen,” she informed him kindly.

“That’s *so* impressive. My aunt has an herb garden-“ he launched into what I figured was absolutely a lie and Aveline nodded along.

The doorbell rang and I thanked the goddess that Yuna was a few minutes early. Now we could leave and maybe while we watched the movie, Merric would be *quiet*.

“I got it,” I told my cousin before she could get up, and breezed to the door to open it. “Hey Yun-“ I stopped speaking, the person standing on the front steps was certainly *not* Yuna.

It was Indra.

I couldn’t help it. I stepped forward and hugged him, relief flooding my body. I’d texted him after last night’s debacle, though I hadn’t told him what happened. I’d just made sure that he really was safe with the others.

Indra stiffened slightly, then returned the hug with a soft chuckle. “This is a surprise. But I like it,” he murmured in my ear. “Maybe I should come over unannounced more often.”

I pulled back, feeling embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

Then it hit me. *Indra was here*. I had very purposefully *not* told them about Merric whatsoever, and now the ‘two tailed fox’ was in my living room, in plain view and waving his tails about happily.

Shit.

“You’re in a good mood,” Cian walked up my front steps with Akiva beside him, all three of them dressed nicely in dark v-neck t-shirts and fitted jeans. “I thought you might be a little angry at us for coming over unannounced.”

“Oh.” I blocked the doorway, the movement sudden and *very* obvious.

Akiva’s eyes narrowed and he immediately tried to peer past me.

“What are you guys doing here?” I tried very hard to look casual, and took up as much of the open space as I could while leaning on the frame.

Cian blinked, suspicion crossing his features as well. “We came to invite you out,” he told me slowly. “But now I wonder what you’re doing in there that you don’t want us to see. You’re certainly dressed nicely.” It was a good thing the door sat higher than the porch, otherwise he would have easily been able to look right past me and at Merric.

An uber pulled up, the back door opening to let Yuna step out.

She was just as gorgeous as the last two times I’d seen her, and now the Cecealia wore ripped skinny jeans, combat boots, and a black cropped shirt.

The look on her face held suspicion, confusion, and impatience.

As I watched, she marched right up the stairs, pushed her way past Cian, and turned to glare at Indra with flared nostrils.

“*This* is the hellhound we almost died for last night?” she asked, teal gaze switching to look accusingly at me.

“What?” Indra’s brows furrowed. “Last night?”

The Cecealia turned from me slowly, looking him over again. “You didn’t tell them.” It wasn’t a question.

Before anyone could speak, I laughed, the sound high pitched and nervous. “Nothing happened last night,” I lied. “This is Yuna. She’s my friend-“

“By the Drowned God you had better play on both teams,” the Cecealia continued, looking between me and the growing crowd.

“Uhhh,” I answered in a small voice, unsure of how to handle the supernatural traffic jam at my door. Nothing could make this moment worse, I was sure.

“Hey Yuna!” Merric appeared over my shoulder, waving to the Cecealia.

No. I was wrong. Merric would definitely make it worse.

Cian’s brows rose slowly, and he met Merric’s gaze. “I feel like I missed something,” he said finally. “Maybe a lot of somethings.” He smiled at me. “Maybe you could let us in? *All* of us?”

For half a second, I considered the viability of closing and locking my front door.

Then suddenly the door was pulled out of my grip by my *favorite* cousin and she pushed me to the side. “Come in. I’m actually really excited to see George talk her way out of this.”

“There’s nothing to *talk my way out of*,” I hissed, standing back as all five preternaturals filed into our living room and realizing that wasn’t precisely true.

Cian and Akiva sat on the couch, Indra on the floor so he could lean against Akiva’s legs. Aveline went back to the recliner, legs crossed under her, and Merric went back to examining our video game collection.

Yuna rounded on me.

“Am I wasting my time here?” The Cecealia asked me, question straightforward.

“What?”

She jerked her chin at the three men. “I don’t care if you’re sleeping with them. I don’t care if you’re sleeping with the fox.”

Merric looked at us, wide eyed.

Never in a million ears would I be having sex with the fluffy, murdering trickster.

“But if you’re not into women and I’m wasting my time, I’m out.”

“Are you the water shifter from the cemetery?” Akiva asked, twisting to look at us.

Yuna turned to him. “I am.”

Akiva looked slightly taken aback, impressed, and unsure. “You know your girl-crush is a *Cecealia*, right George?” he asked delicately.

I still wasn’t quite sure what the significance of that was. Wasn’t she just a type of mermaid? That’s the impression I’d gotten from Merric, anyway.

“Yeah, I knew that,” I said, trying to laugh it off. “So?”

Yuna was eyeing me suspiciously.

“She told me it was really hot when you impaled someone with your fingers,” Akiva informed Yuna. “Safe to say, she’s into you and all your…'*you know*.”

The Cecealia smirked at him, seeming pleased, before rounding on me once more.

I didn’t know what he meant about her '*you know*’.

“Explain to them what happened so that we can leave. Or just invite them so we can tell them on the way. The fox has already ruined the date; what’s three more *men*?” She said the word like it was dirty. Like *men* were dirty.

Honestly, I didn’t always disagree.

“You didn’t tell them?” Aveline asked, surprised.

“Didn’t tell us what?” Cian’s voice was sharp, and it was the first time I’d ever heard him so serious.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said, laughing nervously. “We just ran into a bit of vampire trouble last night. No big deal.” I repeated the line as if anyone would believe me if I said it again.

Yuna studied me carefully. “We did not run into a *bit* of vampire trouble,” she said, eyes not leaving mine. “The witch here got a call from her *hellhound*,” she threw Indra a dirty look. “How apparently her other friends were injured-I guess that means you two-and she was frantic when I found her. The fox hijacked a ride with us and we ended up in a warehouse, just to find out she was mind-tricked by a vampire and we were walking into a very bad situation. Did she tell you we almost died?”

“It was really fun though,” Merric put in helpfully. “Like, when that wendigo was chomping at your throat and then I had to turn out the lights? There had to be *nine* preternaturals there.”

I had a good feeling that he was neither trying to be helpful, nor unaware of what he was doing.

“I notice you didn’t introduce me to your new fox friend. Or tell me you found him,” Cian pointed out. “I thought we were working together on this.”

Yuna scoffed. “The fox is below mentioning. She didn’t even know that foxes can’t work real illusions until their *third* tail.”

Thanks, Yuna.

“I was helpful though,” Merric argued, whirling with his bushy tails writhing.

“Were you?” Cian looked at him, smiling. “That’s surprising.”

Merric looked at him and I doubted it was my imagination that his smile turned a bit *cruel*.

“We’re going to be late,” Yuna said, checking her phone. “Do you want to come with us, hellhound? I’d like to learn more about who I almost died for last night.”

“Me?” Indra stood up, surprised, and looked around. “Can they come?”

Yuna surveyed Akiva very seriously, then her eyes went to Cian for a moment. “The lich can come,” she agreed.

“If we get a plus-two, I’m bringing the vampire and Aveline,” Merric added.

Aveline put her hands up, already shaking her head. “Oh no-I’m not coming with you on your date.”

“It’s not a date,” I said sharply. “It can’t be a *date* with six of us.”

“It can if you want it to be,” Aveline disagreed. “Just remember what I said earlier.”

Metal clinked together and I looked up to see Yuna plucking my keys off the hook. “I drive better,” she informed me when I made a questioning noise. “Are you coming?” she addressed the question to Indra, but Cian answered.

“If you’ll let us. We were going to see if George wanted to go out anyway, so we’ll join you instead if that’s all right.”

Yuna nodded her assent like she was the one in charge of our *outing*.

“You’ve never even seen me drive!” But I was following her out anyway, Merric following us with an indignant squawk about being left behind.

“I’ve seen you fight. It was enough,” Yuna answered simply. I had no idea how that equaled out to my driving.

“Where are we going?” Cian asked, opening the door of his own Jaguar.

“The theater.” Yuna rattled off an address without blinking as I got in my side of the car. Once again, Merric was relegated to the back, and seemed quite happy about it.

“See you there,” Akiva promised, still smiling.

I closed my door, still trying to wrap my head around what was going on.

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CHAPTER 19

The movie had been all right, though I'd been unable to focus on much of it. Merric had sat on one side of me, Yuna on the other, and the other three men had sat in the chairs behind us. Akiva hadn't seemed thrilled with the seating arrangements, but I'd figured that at least with Merric beside me, I could see if the kitsune started anything.

After filing out of the theater, Cian had suggested that we walk along the quarter and find some place to eat. No one disagreed.

"I *love* this place," Merric put in voraciously, having stopped in front of the entrance to a large café. At nearly nine at night, the place was still flooded with diners. Must have been a popular restaurant.

Yuna looked through the window, quiet, while Akiva studied the menu on the window. "I'm fine with this," the lich said.

Cian was standing back while the others milled around, as if shepherding a herd of children. The night had turned cool and tourists on the street veered sharply to give us a wide berth without incident. Why? Was it because something about our little group screamed *danger*?

I stood back as well; I'd been separated slightly from the others since we'd left the movie, unable to completely let go of my fretting.

Now I tugged at my shirt, worrying the fabric between my fingers as I watched Akiva and Merric argue over dinner. Should I step in? Would Merric get angry and do something to Akiva if this went on?

Cian stepped closer without me noticing, and put an arm over my shoulders to pull me against him.

"Stop worrying so much," he murmured.

I looked at him, brows furrowed, and opened my mouth to lie.

He spoke before I could. “He won’t do anything.”

“Akiva?” I whispered, unsure. “That’s not-“

“Merric.” His smile was warm and reached his eyes easily. “So stop looking at him like he’s a bomb ready to go off, all right?”

“You don’t understand-“

“I do.” His smile turned gentle. “I’ll address it, all right?”

How did he know about Merric? My heart jumped in my throat, my pulse rocketing, and Cian pulled me tighter. “No-don’t say anything-I’m not supposed to tell-“

“You didn’t,” Cian assured me. “I promise-“

“Cian-“

“*Watch*.” He looked up, still smiling, and looked to where Indra and Merric were discussing the menu. “Isn’t that tiring, Merric?”

The fox’s ears pricked and my stomach clenched painfully. He turned, smile tinged with confusion “What?” he asked, head tipped to the side.

Cian smiled, but didn’t answer.

Merric’s eyes slid to mine and his smile widened. “I really bother you, don’t I?” he asked, seeming to marvel at my fear.

Indra looked between Merric and me, and took a step back from the kitsune. “Cian?” he looked to the vampire for answers. Even Akiva looked confused.

Yuna’s eyes narrowed and she moved to stand at my other side protectively.

It made me feel a little better.

“I think this has gone on long enough. Did you tell her to keep it a secret?” Cian’s expression was patronizing. “From *me*?”

Merric’s eyes didn’t leave mine; it was as if he had very little interest in Cian. “I asked her earlier who’d been in her yard,” the kitsune said, voice cold and much more reminiscent of his true self. “The rain washed away your scent, but I should’ve *known*.” Finally he turned to grin at Cian.

“What’s going on?” Akiva asked quietly. “And does it warrant making a *scene*?” he gestured towards the humans on the street, who still weren’t paying us much attention.

“No, no scene. I’m just wondering why Merric still insists on hiding his tails. It’s been how long now since we last met? Two hundred years?”

Merric considered it. “Almost three,” he amended.

“And you still play the most pathetic games.”

“Cian-“ I was pretty sure he shouldn’t be insulting Merric, but the vampire only smiled, eyes still on the kitsune.

“I think George has been through enough the last couple of days. She deserves to enjoy dinner.”

Merric’s brow rose. Only his attitude had changed; his physical appearance remained the same. “Are you telling me to leave?”

Cian shook his head. “Quite the opposite-I’d love to hear all about what you’ve been doing for the last couple of centuries. But you *will* stop intimidating her.”

“That’s why the vampires last night didn’t come after us,” Yuna said suddenly. “I wondered; they should’ve caught us easily. It was you.” She looked to me, eyes narrowed. “The wendigo, too. George didn’t kill it.”

Her faith in me was inspiring.

Merric rolled his eyes, barely sparing Yuna a glance. “Fine,” he said. “You can stop shaking like a field mouse, George. I don’t care if your friends or your cousin know what I am. But-“ The word was sharp and he looked back to Cian. “*You* don’t get to sit beside me at the table.” Then, just like that, he was back to his façade.

He pulled the door open, smiling, and gestured us in with a flourish. Akiva and Indra passed him first, the hellhound giving the kitsune a searching look. Yuna followed brusquely.

Cian went next, leaving me as the last one through the door. As I passed, a long white tail wrapped around my waist, pulling a gasp from my throat.

Cian didn’t even turn when he spoke, “*Enough*, Merric.”

The fox laughed, but his tail vanished. “I’m only teasing. It’s in my nature.” He walked beside me, then caught up to the vampire to walk with him like they were old friends.

Were they?

We followed a hostess to the covered patio, which was mostly empty, and Indra helped her push three tables together for us.

When Merric tried to sit down in between Akiva and Yuna, the Cecealia snarled at him, causing the kitsune to laugh and jump to another seat.

When I approached, however, Yuna tugged me over, kicking the chair out for me.

There was very little room between the two, and I ended up with our elbows almost touching.

Akiva grinned and hooked a leg around mine. Yuna rested her forearm against my own.

Maybe this *was* a date.

Cian sat across from me, and Merric balked cheerfully about having to sit next to the vampire, while Indra sat across from Akiva on his other side.

“Relax,” Cian’s foot found my unclaimed one and he pressed his ankle to mine. “He’s just a big, fluffy, chaos fox.”

“Void kitsune,” Merric corrected, looking at his menu.

Yuna leaned towards him, head cradled in her palm. “And I thought George’s taste in friends was bad before,” she commented, earning the kitsune’s hapless smile.

“Hmm?” Merric put a hand to his chest, looking wounded. “You don’t mean to say *I’m* the more questionable choice between us, do you *Cecealia*?”

“What’s the big deal about her being a Cecealia?” I asked, finally unable to help myself.

Indra’s eyebrows shot up. “You know what that is, don’t you?” he asked me, then looked towards Yuna. “No offense, Yuna.”

She shrugged. “None taken.”

“It’s like a mermaid, right?” I looked to Merric for validation and watched his smile widen.

Yuna turned to me. “Only in the *vaguest* sense of the word,” she informed me coolly.

“Okay, so what’s the big deal?”

“What do you eat, Yuna?” Cian asked patiently, smoothing his hands over the checkered tablecloth.

“Fish.“ Yuna fixed him with her teal gaze. “I don’t *eat* the drowned.”

“The drowned?”

“They’re trying very hard to make me admit to why my kind aren’t very well liked by other water folk or land folk,” Yuna put her menu down and faced me. “If you don’t know, then you can’t really decide if you’re all right with it.” Her gaze slid sideways, like she was unsure for the first time, but then flashed back to mine.

“A Cecealia is a water shifter. We have the lower bodies of an octopus. And we’re very well known for *drowning or strangling* our lovers, among other unsavory things.”

“Oh. Okay, well that seems counterproductive.” I blinked in surprise. “Why do you drown your lovers?”

“Because it pleases us to do so.” She didn’t seem upset about the prospect.

“Well.” I glanced down at my menu, then back to her. “You’ve saved my life twice. Do you have any intention of drowning me?”

She smirked. “No. Why drown you, when it’s seemingly much more difficult to keep you alive? That sounds like more fun.”

Merric snorted.

“So you won’t drown me?”

“I doubt it.”

“And you won’t strangle me?”

“I may, if you irritate me. But not to death; you’ll be fine.”

I considered her words. “What about them?” I gestured at the others. “Will you strangle or drown them?”

She scowled, like it was the most grotesque suggestion she’d ever heard. “They’re *men*,” she said forcefully.

I couldn’t help my grin. “As long as you don’t kill me, I don’t want you to leave.”.

“What about you?” she looked at Cian. “Are you going to chase me off your witch?”

Cian shrugged. “She can make her own decisions. And she isn’t my property; she can be with who she wants, no matter how….” He looked slowly, and very pointedly, at Merric. “Questionable.”

The waitress appeared at our table, all smiles and southern charm. She rambled off about their specials, and with a jolt I realized I hadn’t even looked at the menu.

I’d been a bit distracted. I read over the page-long menu, surprised that it was mostly food I’d never had. This place really did take being smack in the middle of New Orleans very seriously.

Akiva nudged my arm and I looked up at the expectant waitress. “Can I have the creole pasta?” I asked politely. “And cherry lemonade?” The waitress nodded as she took my order. Yuna ordered some fancy seafood dish, while Merric outdid her with an even fancier oyster concoction.

She left, though returned a second later with two baskets of bread.

“So how *was* Paris after all of the nobles wanted to behead you?” Cian asked, grabbing a roll from the basket. “I’d thought you might not make it

out.”

Merric laughed. “It wasn’t that big of a deal. Humans are so *stupid*, Cian. No offense to your parents.” It was such an unnecessary insult that I snorted, taking my own roll and slathering it in butter.

Cian grinned, not at all upset. “Really? I always thought you held witches in your lowest regard. So what is it about George that so inspired you to offer her assistance?”

“I tracked him down,” I said, shredding the bread. “I told you I was looking for kitsune, remember?”

“To be clear.” Merric laid his head on his hand, smiling. “I’d like to explain to you, George, how your scry went on my end.”

Great. More insults.

“You sent out that power *begging* for a fox to help you. First-“ He lifted his free hand, pointer finger extended. “You found Nicolette Blaque. She sensed you immediately and pushed you away. Then-“ he lifted his middle finger. “You found Adam. He’s eight and had no idea what you were doing. So, I pulled it off of him and let you find me instead.” His ring finger popped up and his grin brightened. “*Then*, after you lied to me about calling, you tried again. I was in a hurry, so I didn’t want to manually pull your little magic off of any of the others you might find, fun as it was. So I dampened your spells, clouded your cousin’s divining, and here we are. I’m not sure how much credit you get for *finding* me, George.”

“Really?” Yuna grinned her own sharp-toothed smile. “Because I see it differently. George put out a call for kitsune, was looking for one powerful enough to help, and you just couldn’t help but get involved. So she absolutely netted herself the perfect fox.” Her brows rose. “Unless I’m misunderstanding?”

I was taken aback at her words. “Wow. That’s the nicest thing any of you have said about my powers.”

Cian scowled. “That’s not true,” he said, trading a glance with Indra. “I’ve said plenty of good things-“

“No you haven’t,” I promised. “You normally say ‘no, that’s a bad idea. Don’t do it.’ Or ‘No, don’t go looking for a fox. You won’t do it right.’” I gestured at Merric, who sipped his water. “I’m pretty sure I did *something* right?”

“If he feels like helping when we need him,” the vampire reasoned.

“He *promised* he would.”

Now Cian turned to look at Merric, surprised. “You did?”

Merric nodded fervently. “Absolutely. George calls me for help with your little malcontents and I show up, no questions asked, to break any illusion you need.” He was smiling sweetly again. It didn’t bode well for me.

Cian’s eyes narrowed.

“Why?” Indra asked. “What do you get out of it? Money?”

I was slowly beginning to see where this was going and wanted to change directions.

“It’s fine,” I said nervously. “He said he’d help, so he’ll help. We have bigger problems-“

“I’d never ask George for money.” Merric’s tone was innocent and shocked. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“What did you offer him?” Cian’s voice was quiet as he looked at me. “George?”

I very pointedly folded my napkin. “It’s fine, Cian. I can make my own choices, thank you.”

“I’ll tell you,” Merric offered kindly. “It’s nothing to be *ashamed of*, George. We’re all friends here.”

I was beginning to see that he enjoyed making my life difficult.

“George agreed to owe me a *debt*.” I heard Indra groan at Merric’s words, and his elbow landed hard on the wooden table. The kitsune was positively beaming now.

“What kind of debt?” Cian pressed.

“Any kind I want.” Could he be any happier?

Cian looked at me, but I held my hand up between us. “No. Nope. Not tonight, Cian.”

“Tomorrow,” Akiva agreed. “When she regrets the decision more.”

I elbowed Akiva hard. He didn’t seem to mind, and *jerked* hard at where our legs were tangled together, nearly pulling me into his lap.

Yuna was the one to pull me back upright.

“I could give you something to cover her debt,” the Cecealia offered casually.

“I already have a Memento,” Merric told her. “But if I didn’t, I’d take you up on that.”

“What’s a Memento?” I asked Yuna.

“It’s the last remnant of one of those drowned by Cecealia,” she explained. “It holds the power of their deaths.”

Well I wasn’t sure why anyone would want that, frankly. I didn’t press it.

“*So*!” Merric clapped his hands together and grinned around the table. “This is a great day for me. But I gotta know-how’d you get a hellhound *and* a lich in your bed, Cian? Isn’t that a lot to handle?”

Even *I* was curious about that one.

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CHAPTER 20

After a lengthy dinner that became more enjoyable over time, Yuna excused herself. She said the restaurant was close enough to where she lived that it was an easy walk, and that she'd enjoy the night.

Before leaving she'd reminded me that I owed her another date and to call her if I had any plans to make bad decisions.

Merric simply vanished. One minute he was at the table, the next he was gone without any kind of goodbye.

The guys asked if I wanted to walk with them, and I'd agreed. Most likely they wanted to make a new battle plan, or tell me again how stupid I was for agreeing to owing Merric a debt.

As such, I trailed behind them as they walked, sure they'd be content to enjoy each other's company much more than mine.

"What are you doing?" Akiva barked, stopping suddenly and looking over his shoulder.

"Staring at your flawless ass," I quipped, a half smile finding my face.

"Well come walk with us. Then you can *touch* it," the lich pointed out.

I scoffed but lengthened my steps until I caught up to them. Akiva linked his arm with mine, earning a curious look from me.

"What are *you* doing?" I asked, shaking my arm pointedly.

"Making sure you don't fall behind. Who knows what you'll find in the dark if I'm not watching you." He matched his steps to mine as Indra let Cian draw him into his embrace.

They were an adorable group.

“Are you going home?” Indra asked as we walked. I didn’t know this part of New Orleans, though the businesses were becoming sprinkled with homes.

“Yeah, I guess,” I shrugged. “Sorry I ruined our strategy meeting for tonight.”

Akiva looked at me, perplexed.

“What strategy meeting?” Cian asked.

“That’s why you came over, right? I know you said you were going to invite me out, but I figured that was just something to tell Merric.”

“No.” Cian said slowly. “We were there to invite you *out*. Like we said. So you didn’t ruin anything.”

“Oh. I’m sorry-were you guys going to *Portal* again? It’s not too late if you still want to-“ Akiva turned, hand sliding from my arm and both hands reaching up to cup my face.

He kissed me suddenly, sweetly, while standing in the middle of the sidewalk. My eyes widened slightly, but before I could think to reciprocate, he pulled back, ignoring or unaware of how my feet seemed glued to the sidewalk and my heart seemed determined to pound out of my chest.

“I’m looking for creative ways to get you to stop misunderstanding us,” he explained, smiling. “We wanted to spend time with *you*. Were we going to take you to Portal? Yes. But this didn’t ruin anything, silly witch.”

Oh.

I looked from him to the others. Cian was grinning and I had the decency to blush. My fingers twisted in the hem of my shirt and my stomach clenched, though not unpleasantly.

“Come home with us,” he went on, voice low and frankly, a little *wicked*. “Don’t you want to? *I* want you to.” He reached out, fingers pressed lightly to my waist. *I absolutely wanted to*. I swallowed, my mouth very dry.

“Well-I’d have to go get my car. And I don’t know my way around that well-“

“We parked on a residential street,” Cian informed me. “Two blocks from here. And you’re standing in front of our house.”

What?

I leaned back, craning my head back to look above me. All I could see was the front of a porch, an overhang, and the sky.

“That seems mysterious.” I looked back to Akiva. “Did you bring me here on purpose?”

“Yes,” the lich informed me, thumbs pressed to my hips. It was incredibly distracting. “But it is your choice. I’ll walk you back to your car, if you’d rather.”

“But-“ My mind reeled. Hadn’t they said they were fine with me going out with Yuna? Didn’t that mean we were not dating? I wasn’t sure I would be able to spend a night and dismiss it.

“You want to go home?” Indra assumed.

“No! It’s not that. You told Yuna you didn’t mind me being with her.”

“Yes,” Cian agreed. “And?”

“*And?* I’m not sure I can do a *one night only* with you guys and wow, yeah, I realize how that sounds but I’m sticking by it.”

“Why would it be one night because of Yuna? Unless she drowns you,” Akiva mused.

“Because she wants to go *on a date*.”

“Ah.” A smile spread over Cian’s lips. “I see.”

“Great. I don’t.”

“We’re *poly*,” Cian explained. “You know what that means, right? Because I’m sure Akiva will draw you a diagram if needed.”

I glared at Akiva. I *knew* what polyamorous meant. “Yeah, Cian. I know what polyamorous means.”

“It means we hold the same expectations, and beliefs, for any partners we bring into our relationship. If you want to date Yuna, then do so. If you want to date Yuna *and* come into our house, that is absolutely fine as well.”

“I can still draw you a diagram,” Akiva offered. “*If* you’re coming in?” He raised a brow, hands still at my waist.

I gave it another moment of thought, then spoke. “Well as long as there are diagrams, I suppose.”

He grinned forcefully, swept past me, and tugged me up the stairs with Cian and Indra following.

“Come in,” Akiva invited. “Shoes off.” He glared at me, like I might break the cardinal shoes off rule in his house.

I held up my hands in surrender, toeing my shoes off-and my socks-and shoving them against the door with another pair of converse.

“So how does this work?” I asked a bit nervously. Had they done this before with other people? Definitely. *Channel Aveline the sex goddess,* I

thought to myself. *You want this. They said they want this. You got this*.

"This?" Indra questioned, pulling me into the den. A large black sectional sat against the wall, taking up the entire corner. The den itself was large, offering a lot more space than I'd originally thought. A tv hung on one wall, and the hardwood was smooth under my bare feet. Bookcases lined the far wall. The room was incredibly extravagant

While I hadn't been looking, he'd half shifted. His ember-like eyes found mine, full lips parted slightly to reveal elongated canines.

"*This*," I repeated, crossing my arms and giving the room another once-over.

"It works however you want," Cian said patiently. "Within reason."

"Within reason?" I wasn't a parrot, but felt like it all the same.

"Remember what I told you at the club?" Akiva was there again, eyes bright. How could I have forgotten anything he'd told me at the club? Even when I was sure I'd been stood up, I couldn't help remembering Indra's hands on me, and how it felt to kneel between Akiva's thighs.

One hand came up to brush my hair back and he rested his warm palm against the base of my throat. My pulse quickened and I sucked in a breath, anticipation creeping up my spine. "I told you that if you wanted to dictate the course of our actions, you'd have to earn it. So you can either try to *earn it* or you can tell me what you'd like your safe word to be." Fuck.

When my breath caught, it wasn't at all subtle. The lich's grip tightened ever so slightly on my throat, just enough so I could feel it. I scoured my mind, finding it suddenly blank of safe word ideas. "Pasta," I blurted out.

Akiva blinked. "Like what you had for dinner?"

"You put me on the *spot*."

He grinned, but pulled his hand away. "All right. *Pasta* it is. We also use traffic lights."

AKIVA STEPPED SMOOTHLY TO INDRA AND MURMURED SOMETHING IN THE hellhound's ear. Akiva's lips brushed against the hellhound's skin, and he chuckled as the two of them sank down onto the sofa.

Before I could wonder what was said, Cian was behind me, body a solid line against mine. "Half shift," he breathed in my ear.

"What?"

He smiled. “My rules, remember?” His hands trailed down my hips, resting just above my shorts. “Unless you’re telling me *no*?”

I bit my lip and swallowed hard. Trying to dictate our actions to Cian seemed like biting off more than I could chew. Still, I wasn’t exactly dressed to half-shift.

“My shorts come up too high for me to half shift,” I mumbled, fiddling with the denim.

That didn’t seem to dampen his good humor. He stayed where he was, mouth close to my ear.

“Then let me help you with that.” His hands slid around my waist and he pulled my hips closer. I bit my lip, eyes fixed on his hands as he rucked my shirt up over my denim shorts and undid the two buttons slowly.

Helpfully, The vampire slid them down my thighs until they fell to the floor, leaving me in my black and white boyshorts and making me feel vulnerable under his gaze.

“You have a remarkable dedication to theme,” Cian teased, still flush against my back as he ran his fingers over the little pentagrams decorating my panties “And I believe I told you to do something, unless these are in the way as well…?” He tucked one finger into the waist of my panties and tugged suggestively.

It took me less than a second to half shift, my tail trapped between us.

“Good girl.” His lips found my cheek in a quick kiss. My ears twitched as he pulled away, breath tickling the short fur. Heat pooled between my thighs and I fought the urge to press my legs together to relieve the growing need there. His praise definitely had me warmer than I wanted to admit.

Cian sauntered to the sectional, sinking down into the black leather as he sat. He held one out to me invitingly, his smile edged with wickedness. I didn’t need to be invited twice. I walked to him, letting him pull me down onto his lap so that I could straddle his thighs, my knees pressed into the cushions.

Cian reached up, hands tangled in my hair as he guided my face down to his so that he could kiss me. He traced his fingers down my back, leaving my skin numb in the wake of his touch. Soon enough one hand was tangled in my hair again and his grip tightened just enough to burn pleasantly.

His other hand explored my body as his tongue swept over my lip, teeth following and pulling a whine from me. I was acutely aware of his hand on my hip, gripping at my thigh and keeping me on his lap. My tail flicked

every time he touched it, and at his urging I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, nearly pressed against him. My hips pressed to his, rolling against his body as I silently begged for more.

“Easy.” Cian smiled and stilled my hips with his hands, prompting me to make a loose noise of protest. “We’ll get there.” He kissed me once more, lips insistent against mine.

He pulled back again with a grin, tugging at my shirt. “You don’t need this,” he informed me, not unkindly. Cian was already lifting it up and over my head. I helped him, and chucked my shirt somewhere behind me. My eyes found his and I followed his gaze with my hands, hooking my fingers into the fabric of my bra and exiling it to another part of the living room.

Cian’s purr of approval was instant. I reached out, tentatively, and pressed my fingertips to his jaw as I leaned forward to kiss him again. He encouraged me, fangs suddenly very sharp against my tongue as we kissed. His hands slid up my ticklish sides, making me giggle, and he smiled into our kiss as he sat more comfortably against the back of the sofa.

Hands brushed my hips and fingers curled in my hair jerked me away from Cian’s mouth. Akiva pulled me into a kiss, biting at my lower lip before releasing me. He chuckled at my surprise, reaching up to grip my throat in one hand while the other found my breast to tease my nipple. His fingers pinched and teased the sensitive skin, causing me to gasp as Cian captured my mouth in another kiss.

Wait-where was Indra?

Teeth sank lightly into my hip, answering my silent question. My head fell back, mouth open, and my hips bucked into Cian’s. Indra knelt on the floor behind me, hands digging into my hips as he bit and licked at my skin. Fingers pushed at the fabric of my panties, making my stomach tighten, and my tail curled in anticipation. Ten days ago I hadn’t expected to end up here. Hell, I’d never imagined myself in the middle of three incredibly sexy men, all of them with their hands on me. It felt like an impossible scenario that only worked in porn. But here I was.

Indra’s nails pricked at the skin of my inner thighs, pressing his body against my back and trailing kisses over my ribs. The closer he got to my most sensitive area, the more heat seemed to gather between my thighs. There was no way I could stand them not touching me where I really needed them to for much longer.

My breath left me in a *whoosh* when Indra teased my slit over my panties with one finger. I needed him-I needed *them* to do more than tease me.

It was so much at once, and I had trouble focusing on any one thing for long, until one of the men would do something that would force my attention from one to the other; pulling me back and forth like a tug of war contest. Not that I had any intention of stopping them.

“Can I bite you?” Cian whispered suddenly, voice discernible even over the sounds I was making into Akiva’s mouth. I hadn’t realized I’d closed my eyes, but they opened at his question.

“You’ll love it,” the lich purred.

“Won’t it make me too tired?” Blood loss tended to *do* that. Who was I kidding? I felt even warmer all over just thinking about it. If that was even possible.

“I won’t take much,” the vampire promised, hands splayed on my stomach. “I just want to taste you.” His words and tone were incredibly hot.

My mind flashed back to Akiva’s face in the club when *he’d* gotten bitten by Cian. “You can *absolutely* bite me,” I agreed, not needing any more convincing. Hell, he could do much more than that.

He kissed my shoulder sweetly.

Akiva moved his hand so he could grip my chin instead, tilting my head slightly as he continued to taste every inch of my mouth.

While I couldn’t see the vampire, I could still feel Cian’s lips skim up my shoulder, sending my heart rate into high gear at the very small twinge of fear that shot through me. What if it hurt? Did I want it to hurt?

He bit down over my pulse point, sending hot pain shooting through my body that made me gasp into Akiva’s mouth. Oh, I very much liked it. The pain had dulled and been overridden with bright-hot pleasure that made me so much more sensitive to their touches.

Akiva grinned into our kiss, fingers tugging on my hair so he could drink up my ensuing moans.

Indra’s fingers had continued to move across the fabric of my panties, coming closer and closer to where I wanted him to touch me. It was *infuriating*, and I pushed my hips forward in protest.

He acquiesced after another hip roll from me accompanied by a cry that Akiva drank up eagerly. His middle finger rubbed my clit, the feeling intensified by all the other sensations I couldn’t seem to focus on.

Like the heat of Akiva's mouth and the way he seemed intent on claiming my mouth for himself.

Like Cian's fangs still buried in my throat. I could *feel* the pull of his mouth and fangs at my neck, but I never wanted him-or any of them-to stop what they were doing.

Indra's free hand traced my inner thigh, pulling my panties harshly to the side. Seconds later one finger dipped inside my folds and I gripped Akiva's shirt tightly in my fingers. Another joined it, both of them pushing in and out of me while his other hand rubbed circles over my clit. *Goddess*-he was good looking *and* new exactly where to touch me? These men were going to ruin me forever for anyone else.

Akiva's attentions increased as Indra's fingers became more insistent, a third joining the first two as he started moving them in earnest. I whined, hands gripping Cian's shoulders.

Cian suddenly pulled his teeth from my throat, licking over the bite. "Look at you," he murmured silkily. "Coming apart on my lap just from them touching you." He gripped my hips tightly. "Should you be allowed to cum for us, George?"

Akiva pulled away, though he kept me turned towards him so that he could instead kiss and bite at my neck and collarbones.

I didn't answer. I wasn't able to.

Cian gripped my chin, meeting my gaze with harsh red eyes and my blood on his lips.

"I asked you a question. Should you be allowed to cum for us?" he asked very plainly.

I nodded, biting my lower lip.

"Then ask my permission." My eyes widened; Indra's fingers slowed down and I whined again. "Do you want him to stop?" This time I shook my head *hard*. "Then *ask me* for permission."

"Please!" I gasped out. "Please-Cian-can I please cum."

"Say it again." His face glowed from the pleasure of my words, pleasure curling over his full lips. He was enjoying making me ask.

"*Please*-" I wanted to so badly. I wanted Indra's fingers to start *moving* again. "*Please*, Cian."

"Will you be a good girl for me the rest of the night if I let you cum now?" I nodded my head. "Say it, please."

“I-‘ll be a good girl for you.” I’d be damned if the words themselves didn’t set me right back on the edge. “I promise.”

“I bet you will. You can start now, then.” He tangled his fingers in my hair and Indra’s fingers were thrusting into me again, his thumb rubbing hard over my clit. “Come on. Let me hear you, George.” I gasped, hand gripping his wrist as my hips rocked hard into Indra’s hand.

“Cian-“ His hand tightened in my hair and that was it. A tidal wave of pleasure crashed over my body, making me collapse into Cian’s body as I shook with the feeling of so much pleasure. Indra didn’t stop what he was doing, drawing his touches out until I was squirming.

Only then did he pull his fingers back and appeared at my side to push Akiva back into the sofa, his fingers at the lich’s lips and the latter licking at them eagerly while Indra murmured encouragement. My breath hitched in my throat and I curled a hand into Cian’s hair. My eyes stayed fixed on the way Akiva licked and sucked at Indra’s fingers, like he couldn’t get enough of how I tasted on his skin.

They didn’t stop even after I was sure Indra’s fingers were clean. At some point both of them had lost their shirts, and as they kissed, their pants and underwear followed until the two men were both naked on the sofa beside us.

“Are you doing okay?” Cian tipped my chin up, eyes sparkling.

“Yes,” I told him, pulling myself more comfortably into his lap, pressing my body firmly against his so I could feel his arousal between my thighs.

“Good. Because you *did* just promise to stay all night.” His grin was wicked, and I was certainly not put out by his words.

“Is that a challenge?” I breathed, voice raspy. Did I want it to be a challenge?

“Don’t make it one,” he warned, hands sliding to my lower back. “You might bite off more than you can chew, if you do.” That sounded like the best kind of threat.

“Oh, that was definitely a challenge.”

“Darling girl.” His voice was a low, amused chuckle.The vampire gripped my hips, my hands going to his shirt and pushing it up and off. *Finally*. Now I could appreciate more of him, and I wasted no time in doing so.

My hands slid up his chest, over smooth, pale skin and lean muscle.

“Remember when you gave me your blood?” I asked, hands pressed to his shoulders.

Looking bemused, he answered, “I do.”

“When you did, I couldn’t get this image out of my mind,” I admitted. “Of me in your lap, my teeth at your throat instead of your wrist.”

“Didn’t think you enjoyed my blood that much,” Cian teased.

“I didn’t, but I enjoy being in your lap just as much as I’d imagined.” I reached down to unbutton his jeans, pulling out his length and running my fingers along him.

The vampire let out a sharp breath, hands tightening on my hips.

“I couldn’t tell.” I forward to kiss him while his hands ran up my spine. He tangled his fingers in my hair and pulled just enough to hurt, sending sharp tingles through my scalp and heat straight to my core.

I moaned into his mouth, tongue darting out to lick at his bottom lip before letting him coax my tongue against his.

Indra’s mouth skimmed my arm, nipping teasingly at my shoulder before the hellhound was pulled away with a low growl from Akiva and murmured words I couldn’t understand.

“He said he wants to watch you ride me,” Cian breathed against my lips.

I sat back slightly, my hand joining his on his cock. “Did he?” I looked to Akiva, who grinned and bit down lightly on Indra’s shoulder. “I might have, *azizati.*”

“Don’t look so puzzled,” Cian reached up to smooth out the confusion of my face, drawing me back for another kiss. “He called you ‘my darling.’”

“Oh,” I breathed, lips brushing his. “That’s all right then.” Of course it was all right. It was more than all right. Everything about this had me wanting more, and I’d do almost anything they asked of me, if it meant having at least one pair of hands on my skin.

I looked to Akiva and smirked. “So you want to watch?” I asked teasingly. Slowly, aware of his eyes, I ran my hands down Cian’s waist, stroking over the vampire’s growing arousal. He didn’t answer, but he didn’t look away from me, either. Akiva kept watching while I lined my hips over Cian’s, lowering myself onto him with a soft gasp.

The vampire drank in my expression, hands back on my hips. “Good girl,” he breathed, pushing me downward when I paused. He was big, and

him being inside me made me feel so *amazingly* full, while causing my muscles to tremble with a slight, burning stretch.

“Do you like this?” He went on, not letting me pause but instead using his grip on my hips to press me down again. “You’re so tight-“ he bit back a moan. “I bet you feel so full, don’t you?”

“Cian-“ I was panting now, thighs trembling as I fought to hold myself up. “You’re-“

“You can take me,” he encouraged, continuing to move my hips until finally I sat flush against his lap again, body taut and hands tangled in his hair. “Just like that. Just like I told you.” He loosened his grip and I leaned forward to nip at his jaw.

While I adjusted to the feeling of him inside me, I turned, my eyes finding Akiva and Indra once more. The hellhound was leaning back against Akiva, one leg off the couch as the lich stroked him. Both of them watched me intently. They murmured to each other in their shared language, but I didn’t try to understand. They were gorgeous to watch, and that was all my brain could process at the moment.

Cian had turned to look at them as well, though while I watched he brought his mouth to my neck again, fangs trailing against my skin.

“Bite me,” I breathed, feeling myself tighten around him at the prospect. The feeling of him inside me was *amazing*, and anytime I moved, the promise of more had me rocking my hips against him.

“Maybe,” Cian replied. He guided my hips against his and I took the hint, wrapping my arms loosely around his shoulders and lifting my hips before sliding back down his length. I repeated the motion, my body moving against his. His hands encircled my waist, taking on some of the work himself while my fingers tightened in his hair, teeth biting into my lower lip as my tail curled.

“No, no. Let me hear you,” Cian requested, reaching one hand up to press between my lips.

I parted my lips just as he thrust into me, my moan becoming a loud cry that caught the attention of the other two.

Akiva grinned, and even Indra lifted his head from the lich’s shoulder to take notice.

I leaned back, bracing myself on Cian’s lap as he tipped his head back to watch me, hands moving to travel up my stomach and cup my breasts.

“You can be louder than that,” he told me. “Don’t be shy, George.”

“This is loud,” I breathed, trying to find a better, deeper angle.

“No it’s not.” Suddenly his hands were on my hips again. He stood, urging my legs around his waist at my yelp and walked forward until my back found the smooth wall beside the stairs.

Chest heaving in surprise, I stared up at him. I hadn’t expected him to pick me up, and by his wicked grin I was sure my open shock was plain on my face.

His firm grip on my hips was *sexy*, and when he thrust into me suddenly, hips flush to mine, I gasped. With my legs over his arms, he was able to push deeper into me. “Cian-“ I tossed my head back against the wall, moaning as he fucked me again. “Oh shit-oh *fuck*-“

“Louder,” Cian urged, bracing me against the wall as he fucked me, his thrusts becoming shorter but forcing me against the wall with every thrust.

“This is loud!” I snapped again, the words high and half-gasps.

“No it’s not.” He shifted his grip on my hips, forcing my thighs further apart as he stepped closer to the wall. Now I was trapped against him, his cock deep in my body.

“Oh shit-oh *shit*,” I exclaimed, eyes closed. I was so focused on the feeling of him inside me that I couldn’t even open them.

“Look at me.” It was as if he’d known what I was thinking. I didn’t respond and he hissed. “*George*.” His tone was dangerous.

I opened my eyes through sheer force of will, meeting his gaze and letting out a particularly high moan. “Just like that,” he praised.

“I can’t. *Cian*-“ I wasn’t sure what I couldn’t do. Look at him? Be any louder? Stop myself from going over the edge once again? I was getting closer and closer, the edge of that cliff rising up to meet me quickly.

“Yes you can,” he encouraged. “Cum for me again. Good girls do what they’re told, George.”

“Oh goddess, oh *fuck*-“

“Gods, you feel so good. You’re so tight. Just want to feel you cum.” His own words were still clear and intelligible. My own babbling was becoming higher pitched and making less sense now.

He leaned forward until our foreheads touched, still maintaining the intense rhythm of his thrusts that had me going crazy. “You’re so hot like this. Coming apart for me,” the vampire said, managing to tangle his fingers in my hair that hung almost to my hips. He *jerked* backward, causing my chin to hitch upward so he could bury his fangs in my throat again.

I *screamed*, mind going blank. I couldn't tell what felt better and my legs locked around him, orgasm hitting me hard. Everything was white-hot-pleasure and I never wanted it to end as I rode out my orgasm with him inside me.

Finally I was aware of him speaking quietly in my ear, having drawn his fangs from my throat only a minute or so after biting me. "Do you want to let me go?" He asked. "I'm getting really close-"

"Cum inside me," I gasped, not unlocking my legs from him.

He hesitated. "You're undead," I went on. "I'm a hybrid. No diseases, no pregnancies all around. Please, Cian. I want to feel you." I wrapped my arms tighter around his shoulders and pulled myself up to him so I could press our bodies together.

The vampire kissed me, immersing himself into me again with desperate strokes. "Just like that," I moaned, tangling my fingers in his hair. "Please, Cian…" The aftershocks from my orgasm were heightened by his movements, until finally he pressed me against the wall once more and buried himself deep in my body, face against my throat.

Across the room, Akiva and Indra both watched, though their positions had reversed and Indra was straddling the lich.

"It's my turn next, right?" Akiva asked, gaze holding mine. "Because I'm sure I heard something about all night, yes *azizati?"*

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CHAPTER 21

I wasn't sure what I was expecting when I woke up, but being the little spoon to Indra wasn't it.

The hellhound had one arm pinning mine, the other wrapped under my jaw as a slightly boney pillow. He was still very asleep, If his deep breathing against the back of my neck was anything to go by.

His legs were tangled with mine as well, and it made a smile touch my lips. The hellhound was like a *spider monkey.*

The smile drifted away a second later. Was this moving too fast? Was *I* moving too fast? What kind of person had marathon sex with three men in a very solid relationship without having known them very long, whined about not wanting to make it a one time thing, and then *stayed the night* in their bed?

I needed Aveline for this kind of spiraling moral conundrum.

Swallowing, I tried to silently convince my heart that no, it didn't need to speed up like we were about to run a race. That we were *fine*.

Indra suddenly pulled me closer to him with a sigh.

"Are you okay?" He murmured against my ear.

"Of course I am," I lied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He didn't answer, instead kissing my shoulder and sitting up. "I see we were *left* here," the hellhound observed in dry amusement. "At least this time I had you instead of a body pillow shoved into my arms."

I sat up as well, grinning. "They really do that?"

Rolling his eyes, Indra nodded. "They don't need a lot of sleep, being undead and all. So they're up more than me." He stood up, stretching, and very kindly allowed me to silently appreciate his body.

Indra caught me staring and smiled softly. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” I got up as well, then paused. “Oh. My clothes are downstairs.” I didn’t particularly want to stomp down the stairs *naked* in order to get them.

Indra opened a drawer in the nightstand and pulled out a red, long sleeve shirt and boxers that he tossed onto the bed beside me, effectively ending the thought of walking downstairs naked.

I grabbed them, pulling on the boxers and pressing the shirt against my nose to inhale.

“It’s-“

“Cian’s,” I affirmed. The shirt was snug around my chest-not surprisingly-but I just needed to grab my own clothes from the floor downstairs.

Indra himself had thrown on a pair of sweat ants and a t-shirt. He looked me over and fought to hide a grin at how Cian’s clothes did *not* fit me.

“Want me to just grab your clothes and come back?” He asked very politely.

I considered it-*Goddess* I considered it-but I was an adult. I wasn’t going to have him fetch my clothes.

“No,” I said with a sigh. “It’s just for a moment. And what’re the chances that Cian or Akiva are in the living room?”

Indra, blessedly, didn’t answer. He only nodded as if to humor me and I followed him out of the bedroom.

Sure enough my clothes were still in a pile on the living room floor.

Sure enough, so was Akiva. He glanced away from the television as we came down the steps, looking me over until finally meeting my narrow-eyed glare.

“I didn’t say anything.” He rested the bowl of cereal he had been holding on his knee and raised his hands in surrender. “But if I did-“

“You didn’t. I like it that way,” I grumbled, grabbing my clothes from the floor and striding quickly to the downstairs bathroom.

My hair was a *mess*. It was tangled and gave me the appearance of a mane rather than normal-people hair. I finger combed it as best I could, running water through it in an attempt to get it to behave. But it only slightly worked, making me sigh. How *attractive*.

I did, however, feel better when I was back in my shorts and shirt from the night before, bra not included. It was too early for that, and I was too

lazy.

It was an unspoken rule to leave before things got awkward, wasn't it? When I opened the door and made my way back to the living room to make an awkward goodbye, I found my path blocked.

Cian stood in the hallway between me and the living room, a steaming green mug in his hand.

"I made coffee," he said, but my eyes were fixed on the line of his throat, and the way his hands were wrapped around the mug. For a moment I was unable to tear my mind away from the memories of what we'd done only a few hours back and how those hands felt on my body.

"Oh?" I wasn't sure if it was an affirmation or a question, but I stared at the mug like it could bite me.

"Unless I'm interrupting you running out the door." He leaned against the frame, still holding the mug like it wasn't probably scalding. Didn't he feel the heat? Didn't it burn?

"Uhh." That was a bit too close to the truth and I studied the ceiling.

"It's only awkward if you make it awkward," Cian went on slowly. "Don't you want to hang around for a bit? Akiva's eating Lucky Charms, if you'd rather have that than coffee."

I couldn't help but grin, though I tried to hide it. I failed, and finally I dropped my gaze down to Cian and forced my stomach to unknot itself.

"I don't like coffee," I admitted. "But I like Lucky Charms. Will he share?"

Cian grinned. "Not willingly." He turned and walked into the kitchen, not looking back to see if I would follow.

I did, leaning on the island as he went to a cabinet and opened it to reveal very mortal-looking breakfast foods. Toaster pastries, cereals, and granola were jammed together haphazardly in the pantry.

Cian pulled down a box of Lucky Charms, found a bowl, and filled it half full.

"He *drowns* it in milk, but I like to think you have better taste than that," the vampire peered at me as he put the cereal back.

"What are you talking about? That's prime cereal eating," Already he was shaking his head, but he moved to the fridge to grab the milk and slid it to me.

"This is so…" I looked around, unscrewing the lid of the milk and pouring it liberally into the bowl. "Not what I was expecting."

“Were you expecting a fridge full of blood? For sand to spill out around a zombie arm? Or for there to be raw bones for Indra?” Cian’s eyes sparkled.

I rolled my eyes. “No, not that. But come on-a lich eating Lucky Charms for breakfast?” I paused. “So there is no fridge full of blood for you?”

“Nope.” He slid me a mug of tea. “You want sugar?”

“If you have it,” I replied.

“No. I have five types of sugar filled cereal, three kinds of coffee, almond milk and regular, but I do not keep sugar in my house.”

“Seems reasonable,” I shrugged.

A moment later he set a container of sugar in front of me.

“Are you drinking that black?” I asked, putting the lid on the sugar and looking with some mock-horror at his own mug.

“No. It’s bulletproof.” He took a drink as I met his gaze.

“Sorry?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “It’s coffee with butter in it.”

I couldn’t help the look of disgust that scrunched my nose. “*Ew.*”

“Don’t knock it unless you’ve tried it.” He held out the mug but I quickly shook my head.

“No-that just sounds dreadful. Even worse than regular coffee.” I scooped my cereal bowl into my hand and followed him into the living room where Indra and Akiva sat, the latter still eating his big bowl of cereal.

I sat down next to him gingerly and set my tea on the table, he turned a curious look on me, then down to the bowl.

I very pointedly popped a spoonful in my mouth, staring him down. He snorted and leaned back against the sofa, shoulder touching mine. The contact made my stomach tighten and my body seemed to jump in anticipation. *Not now, girl*, I sneered silently. *We’re leaving soon.* As if my body would respond to my reasonable requests.

“What are we watching?” I asked politely after a few minutes of watching the tv, having absolutely no clue what the news anchor was saying as he waved his hand empathetically and spoke close to his microphone. The subtitles across the bottom were no help either.

“The news,” Akiva replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Oh. Of course. *My bad*-“

“It’s in Arabic,” Indra said. “They’re discussing weather anomalies in Cairo.”

“Egypt?” I inquired, surprised.

Akiva turned on me. “No. Canada,” he said in a mockingly-sweet voice.

“You’re a dick,” I chided. I’d meant to keep the insult to myself, but now that it had slipped out I wasn’t the least bit sorry.

“You didn’t mind that part of me all last night,” Akiva reminded me, making me choke on the large mouthful of coffee I’d just swallowed. My face flushed but I didn’t reply. What was I supposed to say? ‘Why yes Akiva, I absolutely love the way you fuck me and I want your dick in me again?’ While true, it didn’t seem like an appropriate turn for this conversation so I busied myself with checking the many messages on my phone.

All of them were from Aveline.

Some were asking how I was, if I was staying out all night, and then they devolved into chains of inappropriate emojis that made me roll my eyes.

“Is that where you’re from?” It was easier to ask Akiva questions when I was staring at my phone instead of looking at him.

“A long, *long* time ago,” the lich mused. “I only go back on rare occasions.”

“Really?” Now I knew where his accent was from. The thickness of his Arabic tone hadn’t waned at all, prompting me to have thought he’d been in Egypt until recently.

Akiva turned on the sofa and I looked up to see that I had his full attention. “What does that mean?”

I felt color rise to my cheeks but before I could busy myself on my phone again, the lich had snagged it from my fingers and tossed it to Indra.

“Nothing,” I dismissed.

“It’s his accent,” Indra assumed. “It’s *always* your accent,” he added when Akiva glanced his way.

“I don’t believe in *assimilation*,” Akiva shrugged one shoulder haughtily. “My culture is important to me. And I prefer my way of speaking.”

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it,” I grumbled defensively.

“Well I should hope not.” He lifted the remote and changed the channel. Now an english-speaking news anchor discussed unusual weather patterns

of Ireland. I didn't get the fixation on the *weather* this morning.

"I think he's coming to see you," Indra mused as Cian sighed into his coffee. A second later he closed his eyes tiredly.

"I think he's just doing his yearly tour of Europe," Akiva disagreed.

"Who are you talking about?" I leaned across Akiva for my phone and the lich groped my ass teasingly. A squeal escaped my lips, stomach tightening as I jumped back into my seat.

I slapped his thigh lightly when I sat back down, phone in hand.

"Just an old friend," Cian explained. "He hates America, so he won't be visiting."

My phone vibrated in my hand and I glanced down at it. Aveline. Again.

This time I did text back with a few choice emojis of my own.

She responded promptly, the message making me snort.

Okay but was I right? It's Akiva, isn't it?

The lich, having no sense of privacy, craned over to read the text before I could snatch my phone away.

"What is she asking?" He inquired curiously. "And why did she think it's me?"

"She asked which of you was the snottiest," I lied.

The lich fixed me with a flat glare. "I bet she asked about my dick."

"Wow you are *so* full of yourself. See? Snottiest," I pushed him back so he couldn't read my messages.

"*Ya haram*," the lich said sweetly. I had no idea what that meant and stared at him blankly.

"*Khalas*," Indra nudged him lightly, then to me he smiled. "He's just showing off now."

"What did he say?" I asked.

Indra frowned.

"*Ya haram*," Cian said the words more slowly and with less of Akiva's rolling accent. "It's mocking; he basically said *you poor thing*. Then Indra asked him to stop. *Khalas*." He said that slowly as well, like he was my new Arabic tutor.

"Can all three of you speak Arabic?" I wasn't particularly offended by Akiva, but it would have been nice to know for myself what was being said.

"Yes. I'll teach you," Akiva bargained. "What did Aveline say about me?"

I very pointedly looked around him again, to Indra. “Can *you* teach me, if I want to learn?” I asked, mostly to piss him off.

“He can’t teach you *Egyptian* Arabic,” Akiva said, leaning forward to meet my eyes.

“I speak Gulf Arabic,” Indra explained. “I’m not from Egypt like him.”

I looked to Cian curiously.

“He can’t teach you either. He’s just picked it up from us,” Akiva’s tone was arrogant.

“He’s right,” Cian was grinning apologetically. “If I tried to teach you, it’d be a weird mix of their dialects and probably only correct some of the time.”

My eyes went back to Akiva’s and I twitched my mouth in a half-smirk. “She thinks you’re the biggest and wants to know if she’s right,” I told him, looking pointedly at his lap, then back to his face.

“Tell her yes,” the lich instructed, leaning back on the couch. “S*hukran.”*

“What?”

He grinned. “That was your word of the day. *Shukran.*” He said it slowly, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I still needed Cian to probably do it.

“What’s it mean?”

“Thank you.”

“Awesome. I’m telling Aveline the truth.”

He looked at me, nose scrunched in disappointment.

I pulled away, my elbow knocking into the arm of the sofa where I’d sat my bag. It fell, the contents spilling onto the floor. *Wonderful.* Two of the charms lay on the floor, along with both of my decks and an empty curio bottle.

With a sigh I shoveled my things back into my bag, though Akiva still managed to snag one of my decks before I could close the bag.

“This is your *thing*, is it not?” He asked, peering at the deck like it might spontaneously, magically combust.

“I suppose that’s one way to put it.” He held my less-favorite deck, and I didn’t mind. “Haven’t you met another summoner before?”

He looked at me, eyes wide in surprise. “No,” the lich admitted without hesitation. “Do you not know how rare your kind is?”

“I know, I know.” I reached out to take the deck from him and he laid it in my hand.

“Would you read for me?” The lich asked curiously.

“Depends on what you’re looking for. I’m not reading some detailed crap about your future or when you guys are getting married.” But I had already lowered myself to the carpet, legs curled under me, and unboxed the cards before looking up at Akiva pointedly. “You have to come down here too.”

He sat on the floor in front of the sofa, eyes on my cards.

“Do you need my blood or hair or something to make it extra accurate?” Akiva inquired, only half-joking.

“Yeah. I need Cian to stab you with a couple safety pins,” I grumbled, shuffling the cards. I wondered if Cian really would go get a safety pin, but when I glanced up I saw that he had not moved from his chair and only watched us. Once the cards decided they no longer needed more shuffling, I laid them into two separate piles. My hands hovered over the cards, the magic pulling at the two parts of the deck and bringing the cards upward into my hands.

Last I tapped the deck three times with one finger. This deck needed it, my other, older deck that I used so much did not.

Feeling like a bit of a show off, I held my hands together over the cards then jerked them apart, forcing the cards to arc into a spread on the carpet almost as if I had threads attached to them. When I looked up, I didn’t see the disinterest or dismissal in Akiva’s face that I’d expected. Instead he watched me closely, eyes fixed on my hands.

I wiggled my fingers, wondering off-handedly if he, too, was thinking about our activities from last night.

“Draw three cards. But-“ I reached out to grab his hand before he could flippantly do so. “Don’t turn them over. Just pull them towards you. *Don’t* just grab three. Find what speaks to you.”

“They are cards,” Akiva said patiently. “If they start speaking to me, I am going to be concerned.”

I snorted but let go of his wrist.

He gazed at the cards, taking a surprisingly long time. Most people ignored my instructions and grabbed at them. At last he pulled three gingerly from the spread and let them sit between us.

“Awesome.” With a twitch of my fingers I brought the cards Akiva hadn’t drawn to my hand and set them to the side. “Now-“ I pulled the three cards more comfortably towards me in the same way, flipping them one after the other.

“Strength, upright.” I pointed to the first card with its minimalistic design. “The Ten of Pentacles, upright.” I gestured to the second. “And the Knight of Swords, upright.”

“Do you have them memorized in any deck? I don’t see names on them,” Akiva mused.

“Yeah. The Rider-Waite-based decks are all similar enough that I can tell.” At his confused look, I went on. “I doubt you want an hour lesson in tarot decks, but my decks are based on one style. It means they have similar imagery and meanings.” To an extent. There were more intricacies to it than that, but I wasn’t going to start making charts and diagrams for him. “Anyway, you’re easy,” I told the lich with a grin.

Indra draped himself over Akiva, looking over the cards. “You hear that?” He rested his chin on the lich’s head. “You’re *easy*.”

Akiva flapped his hands at Indra, shooing him back onto the sofa.

“Your romantic relationship is stable,” I announced, as if he didn’t know.

Cian fought to cover a snort. “You needed your cards to tell you that, huh?” His tone was sweet, though disbelieving. I didn’t get the chance to speak before Akiva jumped in on me as well.

“Is that it?” Akiva asked. “No offense, George, but this is why most people think fortune telling is a hoax.“

“Shut up a sec. Your relationship is stable. To others, it seems as if you and your partners are cool headed. As if you have reached a comfortable place in your lives and things are all static. However, that is not the case.” I pressed my fingers to the ten of pentacles. “Your relationship is unbreakable and filled with passion. You look for ways to challenge and provoke each other, whether it be in the bedroom or outside of the house. Your relationship thrives off of the passion and challenges that you rise to together. You are all evenly matched, and you share-“ I broke off, confused slightly.

I’d had this trio of cards come up for me before, but the reading wasn’t always the same. The cards always whispered to me, nudging me towards one conclusion or another.

“What do we share?” asked Cian, suddenly interested.

“You?” I tried to puzzle it out. “You share…yourselves? No, that’s obvious. Your…magic?” That was closer to being correct.

“Uncanny,” Akiva broke in. “You’re right.” He leaned back against Indra’s knee. “We’ve all shared Cian’s blood. We share his power.”

“Oh.” I sat back, satisfied. I’d never read for a group that had been sharing blood with a vampire. It made sense as to why I hadn’t understood. “Well, there you go. Congratulations. That’ll be seventeen-fifty.”

“I let you eat my lucky charms and drink my coffee,” Akiva retorted. “There’s your payment.

Snickering, I pushed the cards back into their box. “Fine. But *next time*, you owe me for this priceless insight into your lives.”

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CHAPTER 22

Predictably, Aveline had a ton of questions.

She greeted me at the door, vanilla coke already being pushed into my hand as I walked into the living room, down the hallway, and slammed my bedroom door so I could change.

"Did you do it with all of them?" My cousin asked through the wood, having no sense of privacy or decency.

"Yes," I said.

"At the same *time*?"

"No, it was like a well mannered check out line."

"You're lying."

"Of course I'm lying." I pulled the door open, frowning at her. Now I was dressed much more comfortably in running shorts and a t-shirt, and I needed a *shower* at some point very soon.

She sipped her coke, eyes narrowed. "So you aren't going to tell me who the best was? Who did who? Did you *watch* them do each other?"

"Not at all." I grinned at her arrogantly. "You shall have to live and *die* in your disappointment." She wasn't going to get *anything* out of me.

Aveline blinked, displeasure evident. "Whatever. Then I'm not giving you your letter."

My face fell in shock. "Letter? Is it from Mom?"

She shook her head, then let out a breath. "I don't know who it's from, if we're being honest."

"Show me?"

Aveline walked to the kitchen with me following, then tapped her finger on the table near an envelope that radiated magic. What had the sender

done, bathed it in some kind of ritual?

"The fuck?" I asked, whisking it off of the hardwood.

My name was scribble across the envelope, but there were no stamps or return addresses.

But then again-witches rarely needed to use the postal service to get messages to each other.

Trouble was, I didn't recognize the handwriting. I would've known if it was my mother's, and this *wasn't*.

"Are you going to open it?" Aveline asked quietly, peering over my shoulder at the envelope.

"Yeah I…think so?" It was more a question to answer her question.

But I wasn't going to let it just sit here.

So I opened it, dropping the envelope on the floor once I'd pulled out the paper that looked like it'd been pulled from someone's desk notepad.

Meet me at A Little Brew the day after tomorrow at nine am.

I didn't know who had sent it, nor who it was referring to.

"You shouldn't go," Aveline said, taking the note from me. "Or you should take someone. Like Cian."

"He's not my babysitter," I grumbled. "Or my white knight."

Aveline fixed me with a look that I ignored. "If I go, I'll go on my own." The thought filled me with anxiety, but I could *not* allow anyone else to think that I needed them to follow in my shadow.

I was not helpless.

IT WAS RAINING WHEN I STEPPED OUT OF THE HOUSE TO GO SEE MY mysterious letter sender. I made a dash for my SUV and jumped in, closing the door firmly as rain pounded on my windows and streamed down my skin.

"Thanks, weather," I mumbled, remembering the crap about *Cairo weather anomalies* and Cian talking about his friend.

I started the car and pulled out, more confident now in getting around the city since I'd driven around a few times with Aveline. For the last two days, we'd taken advantage of her time off to work on our magic and better acquaint me with the city.

She'd cautioned me twice about this meeting, asking me again to take someone else with me. I'd told her I'd consider it.

I did not consider it.

During that time, I'd texted conversationally with Indra. Less so with Akiva, though the lich did send quips my way at odd hours.

Both of them had assured me that Cian wasn't a social texter. I'd responded that he needed to get with the times.

But something I did notice-it seemed like they were pulling away from me with information regarding Lucia. Did they not trust me to help them anymore?

The thought made my stomach clench. How could I convince them that I could help?

More than anything, I didn't want them to shut me out and treat me like a *child.* No matter that I was afraid, and not used to these kinds of situations. I wanted to help.

I pulled into a parking spot outside the coffee shop, *A Little Brew, that* I'd been invited to, pushing my hair back over my shoulders with a sigh. I wished it was the same coffee shop I'd met Merric in. That one had at least been in a more popular area.

"It's just coffee," I told my reflection. "With a stranger. A witch, who probably isn't my biggest fan. It's *fine*." It would be fine. I would make it fine.

The rain hadn't let up at all, and on my way to the doors I got soaked, my hair plastered to my skin. The rain had gotten heavier on my way over here, leading me to squinting through my fast moving windshield wipers and unable to see well as I sprinted from my SUV to the doors.

Inside, I let my eyes do a quick sweep of the small, atmospheric shop. It was nothing like where I'd met Merric. This one screamed money, and the booths were tucked away to provide privacy, while comfortable chairs lay sprawled around the tables.

I didn't recognize anyone.

A woman about my age stood up, hands busying themselves by twisting her dark auburn hair into a high ponytail. She met my eyes then looked away, as if not wanting to meet my gaze. Finally she gestured me over, fingers barely twitching in a *come hither* motion.

Was it just her? I couldn't scent any other witches in the place, but that meant very little. They could be hiding from me.

The woman was dark haired and dark eyed. She was dressed casually in a nice t-shirt and jeans, and still eyed me like I might attack her.

Well, one of us was going to have to do something.

I approached her carefully, eyeing the cup of coffee on her table. How long had she been here waiting for me?

She slid into one side of the booth. I sat gingerly near the edge of the other side.

Her eyes went to the door behind me, prompting me to look as well. I saw nothing, and looked at her in confusion.

“Did you bring any of them?” She asked tersely. “Cian or-or your cousin?”

I shook my head. “No. Did *you* bring someone?”

She shook her head as well and we stared at each other over her coffee.

“I’m Siobhan,” the dark haired woman said, lifting her hand to drum her fingers on her mug.

“George,” I introduced.

“I know.” Her words were sharp and my brows jerked upward as my own hand gripped the table.“No-sorry. That’s not how I meant it. I know who you are, all of us do. But I’m not mad at you or anything.” She stared at her mug. “Are you helping the new vampire king with…things?” She asked rather obtusely.

“Things?” I pressed.

“With the vampires who don’t want him to be king,” Siobhan said carefully.

“Oh. Yeah, I-I guess I am-“

“Well you should stop.” She looked down again.

“Are you threatening me?”

Already she was shaking her head. “No, I wouldn’t-*most* of us in the coven aren’t like that. I shouldn’t be here either, but…” she looked to the door again. “You promise he’s not here?”

“I promise.”

“How much do you know about us?” The witch spoke after a long hesitation.

“Witches? Or your coven?”

“Our coven.”

“Not a lot,” I admitted. “I didn’t really get that good of an impression when I came down here that night. Can’t say I’m looking to have tea with any of you further.”

Her mouth curved into an unhappy look. “You’re a summoner,” she pressed.

“So glad the world seems to know.”

She glanced at me again. “I don’t think there are any *lone* summoners out there. They all end up in a coven one way or another.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Letting out a huff, she sat back hard. “I’m trying to help you,” she said. “Just-some things I’ve heard-I think you should stop helping the new vampire king.”

“What?” I shook my head, heel tapping in irritation on the smooth floor. “You don’t even *know* me-“

“Can’t he take care of it without you? You’re just one witch.”

“A moment ago you were reminding me that I was a *summoner*.”

“You don’t get what I’m saying!” When I sat back, she turned away from me. “I’m not-I won’t attack you if I lose my temper or anything. I’m a healer.”

That didn’t mean she couldn’t-or wouldn’t- hurt me. It just meant the damage would be worse when she did. Healers were nice, when they wanted to help, and most had even temperaments. But they could also break bones just as easily as mend them. I didn’t want to find out how *helpful* Siobhan was.

“Okay,” I agreed slowly. “Then what are you saying?”

“I wanted to meet you,” Siobhan went on, as if I hadn’t asked. “To see for myself…the coven says a lot of things about you, to all of us. We’re supposed to report back when we see you.” At the surprise in my eyes, she hurried onward. “I won’t do that. We’re not really supposed to talk to you, so I’d be in trouble anyway.”

“Why is it such a big deal?” I asked. She rolled her eyes at me and I wrinkled my nose in scrutiny. “Being a summoner doesn’t make me any more likely to help you or whatever,” I reminded her. “My cousin could do just as much damage as I could, and you know what her powers are.”

“It just is,” Siobhan said. “If you don’t see why, that’s fine, but to Colette, it *is*.” She crossed her arms, dark brown eyes meeting mine. “I wanted to meet you, and to warn you. *Stop* helping him. And figure out how to protect yourself. *Fast*.”

“From what?” My voice was quiet.

She didn’t break our staring contest. “Don’t make me spell it out for you.”

Witches. She meant *witches.*

My heart jumped in my chest and I folded my arms as well. “Why should I believe you? Why wouldn’t I think this is just some kind of trick? I’ve never even *met* you.”

“If you don’t believe me, that’s fine,” Siobhan snapped, head tipping minutely. “But we aren’t all like Colette.”

“You don’t like her,” I assumed. “You don’t want her as your leader.”

Her eyes flickered in something very close to fear and now she did look away from me. “Let’s just say, we wouldn’t be ripping our hair out if something happened to her. Most of us, anyway.”

“If *most* of you don’t want her-“

“It doesn’t matter what *most* of us want. It matters that she has the support of her *family*.”

“They’re that powerful?”

“They’re that *cruel*.” She blinked and stood up suddenly, nearly knocking over the coffee mug. “We’ve talked for too long; they’ll know what I’m doing before long. Just-please do yourself a favor and stop helping him. Lock your door and protect yourself.” She glanced towards the door, then back to me. “Goddess willing, this won’t be so bad for much longer.”

“When the vampires all support Cian?” I assumed, getting up as well.

“When he’s gone.”

“Gone?” I questioned, but she didn’t turn, only walked out the door and turned so that I couldn’t see her. “Siobhan, wait!” I darted out the door as well, looking around for the witch.

But she was well and truly gone.

Biting my lip, I jogged back to my SUV, barely noticing the pouring rain. I needed to get home, to get Aveline, and call Indra.

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CHAPTER 23

I didn't even make it back to my door before I knew something was wrong.

Having just parked my car in our driveway, I had noted with relief that Aveline was home, meaning I could grab her, explain what was wrong, and hopefully go straight to the others so we could figure out what to make of Siobhan's words.

So I'd closed my door hard, biting my lip as I made my way towards the house. The rain had let up, but it was the furthest thing from my mind as I walked.

Something tickled my nose, but I only swiped my hand across my face, strides long. Was Aveline up? If not, I would be *getting* her up.

The closer I got to the house, the more my nose tingled, until finally I sneezed, my eyes threatening to water at the burn in my sinuses.

It was nothing I could put my finger on, but the witch part of my soul screamed like a tornado siren.

My knees cracked hard on the sidewalk, pain ricocheting from my feet to my head like an arc of lightning. I doubled over on all fours, mouth open to gasp in air as my stomach threatened to eject its contents on our sidewalk. When I tried to stand, however, I found I couldn't move my legs.

In fact, I couldn't move at all, other than my eyes and to breathe.

My eyes landed on a woman leaning against a tree, turning something over and over in her fingers.

When I'd gotten home, I'd dismissed her as one of Aveline's neighbors I hadn't met. But now I knew that to be false. The dark haired woman had her eyes firmly on mine, and a smirk drew her thin lips up at one corner.

I immediately tried to draw on my own power, body flowing into a half shift as I brought my wolf to bear. Fangs lengthened, my ears swiveled towards her and my eyesight sharpened.

Until fingers wrapped around my throat and jerked me upright. Limp as a ragdoll, I could only fall into the person behind me, relying on them to keep me up right.

“Put your fangs away,” a low voice requested in my ear. “Before I make you.”

I couldn’t speak, but I didn’t let go of my wolf. Not when my shifted form boosted my power and anger both.

The man sighed, his fingers tightening around my neck and causing me to choke. “If you can’t put your toys away when asked, then I’ll have to.” Magic tingled down my body, burning my fingers, and my wolf receded.

It was as if he’d simply sucked the power from me, leaving me dizzy and spinning while I tried to fight the woman’s magic.

I didn’t succeed. I was still choking and in pain.

Black spots clouded my vision; the woman walked closer, eyeing me impartially.

“Colette said not to hurt her, Rajan,” she pointed out delicately.

“I’m not hurting her. I’m subduing her.”

The woman snorted, but didn’t protest further.

All I could do was gasp as my head spun, chest heaving as I tried to do anything to get more air, even though my body wouldn’t respond to anything I asked from it.

“Someone is going to see,” the woman said after a few more seconds of my slow strangulation. She reached forward and unbuckled my thigh bag, tossing it towards our steps.

“That won’t matter; she can summon her cards without that,” Rajan pointed out.

“It’ll be fine. Stop playing around.” When the man didn’t answer, she rolled her eyes and lifted the feathered charm once more. This time, she bent it hard.

Searing pain shot through my head, and I blacked out.

For a split second I was sure I would wake up and see Indra or Aveline above me. That I’d gone to sleep in my room and the voices swimming in the room around me were those of the people I liked.

Then reality hit and consciousness came quickly.

My entire body protested it, and even half awake, I dreaded what waking up meant. Already I could tell I was tied to a hard chair, my hands behind my back.

Fingers digging into my jaws and jerking my face upward pulled me out of my haze, and I winced at the harsh treatment.

The woman from my house was in front of me, a scowl on her full lips and her brown eyes unkind. “She’s awake.” She dropped my face and I stared at the floor, dazed. Then, she suddenly gripped my hair again, this time yanking my face upward and forcing my mouth open. “Swallow it,” The woman ordered, tipping the smoothie-like contents of a small glass into my mouth.

I choked, but she didn’t relent, and finally I was forced to swallow the foul tasting concoction.

She dropped my head once more.

I stared at the dirt under me, painfully aware of the liquid burning its way down my throat. It burned me from the inside and I closed my eyes against the pain, refusing to cry out.

“You can tell Colette that her magic is bound,” the woman commented airily.

A door opened letting very little light into the room, then slammed shut.

Finally I managed to lift my head, thrilled that I was no longer trapped by magic, and waited for my head to stop screaming.

Where was I?

The woman from my house leaned against a low table, the charm still in her hands while she watched me. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said, a half smirk on her face. “It’s not my fault you’re here. I’m just the delivery girl.” Still, she brandished her magical contraption at me very pointedly.

She had to be a hexer. It was pretty obvious, by the way she used that charm to focus on and immobilize me, and the way she was able to knock me out with it as well.

The only way hexes worked was if the witch had something of their victim’s. A hairbrush, a toothbrush-even a scarf of mine would work. But that meant that they’d been watching me.

That they’d been planning this.

I tried calling my magic to me, wary of the outcome, and gasped at the sudden headache that bloomed behind my eyes.

Her smile widened. “You’re not very smart, are you?”

I swallowed back bile, fighting not to throw up. I couldn’t even *touch* my magic without wanting to vomit.

The door opened once more and I glanced up, unsurprised to see the coven leader, Colette, saunter in like she owned the place. Then again, she most likely did.

I *was*, however, shocked by her companion.

“You,” I breathed, unable to give it the venom it deserved.

Lucia Garza smiled her very sweet smile and followed Colette into the room. “Hello, silly witch,” she teased, running her fingers through my hair and making me jerk away from her in revulsion. “I was surprised when Colette told me it had been so easy to bring you here. Are you truly so weak without Cian and his lovers?”

“Go fuck yourself,” I hissed.

She smiled, then slapped me.

My face whipped to the side at the strength in her hand. When I looked back to her, I could feel the hot pain in my lip and blood tricked, hot and bitter, over my tongue. I pressed my lips together, refusing to cry out though my ears rang sharply.

Colette watched, but didn’t speak.

“You should be grateful. You should be *thanking* me, not insulting me,” the vampire said, circling the chair.

“For what?” I spat around my split lip.

“For this,” she spread her arms wide like we were somewhere *other* than a cell. “For listening to Colette.”

My eyes turned on the older witch. She didn’t have the grace to look ashamed.

“You don’t belong near those *creatures*,” Colette said. “You are much too valuable to die with Cian.”

My stomach tightened. “You don’t know me-and I am not part of your *coven*-“

“Once Lucia is finished, you can leave,” Colette went on. “It isn’t our intent to hurt you. We’re helping you, Georgette.”

Only my mother got to call me that.

“You told Cian you believed him! That you would rather him king than *Gavin*,” I spat the name and Lucia’s eyes narrowed. “What has he done to make you change your mind, Colette?”

“She wised up,” Lucia interjected. “Your new friend is strong, but he is not loved. Do you think the other vampires will fight for him?” she laughed. “He cannot even see through my illusions, nor my brother’s power. Without allies, he is nothing.”

“He will die,” Colette explained. “I bargained with Lucia so that he would not take you with him.”

“That was not your choice to make!” I protested. “Let me go!”

“We are saving your life,” she went on patiently. “Whether or not you see that is not my concern. You are a Levasseur summoner; not a common hedge witch to throw your life away for short-lived infatuation-” Surprise flitted over my face and she smiled coldly. “I understand, Georgette. You’re new here and they seduced you to their cause.”

“You’re wrong-“

“A week,” Lucia interrupted. “He will be dead in a week. Can you keep her leashed until then? If I see her outside of this cell, I will kill her.”

“You won’t,” Colette promised.

“You really think that?” My hands curled behind me. “A week is a *very* long time to think you can keep me here.”

The vampires grinned. “I don’t care either way,” she admitted. “Either you’re here, and you live-so long as you don’t pose a threat to me when *I* rule-or you come out to play and you die.”

“And what are you getting out of this?” I demanded of her. “You don’t strike me as very benevolent.”

“Magic,” the vampire shrugged. “The witches will help me stay one step ahead of Cian. They’ll protect me from his *dog*. Afterwards, I will let them go about their lives.” Her eyes went to Colette, who was nodding.

“As you say, Lucia.”

“Then I will take my leave.” The vampire ran her hand through my hair like I was some kind of pet. I wanted to tear off her fingers one by one. “Remember what I said about her,” she cautioned the coven leader. Without another word, she left; her high heels clicking against the dirty stone floor.

When she was gone, I looked back to Colette. “Let me go,” I pleaded. “I can’t stop you from helping her, but you cannot make this choice for me.”

Colette walked to the low table where the other witch still stood.

My eyes caught movement; Siobhan stood at the door, mouth open, and stared at me wide eyed for a moment. Then Colette turned, and she fled.

“You’ll thank me,” the witch promised. “And I believe you’ll join this coven. Don’t you understand? You belong with your own kind. Not a vampire and his creatures. They aren’t like us.” She gripped my chin in her hand as I shook with rage. “Calm down, dear. Is there really cause to get this upset over them?” Her eyes swam with misplaced pity.

“You don’t understand-you don’t know them!” I argued. “If you do this, I will never forgive you. I will *never* forget it.”

“This is a very severe overreaction for their wellbeing,” the grey-haired woman observed. “You’ve known them less than two weeks; anything you *think* you feel for them is transient, at best. You’ll forget them, when you open yourself up to those in the coven.”

Was she suggesting I *replace* them with witches? Did she think they were interchangeable? The thought made me burn with rage.

“You can’t keep me here for a week,” I promised. “I will find a way out. My magic won’t stay bound that long, and as long as I can fight, I will.”

“You’ve overlooked something important, it seems,” the witch said. “You won’t be awake for any of this.”

My eyes widened and my heart stuttered. “Wh..what?”

“I will put you to sleep, and in a week or so, I will wake you up. You will be free to leave.”

“*No*.”

“You don’t have much of a choice, the witch pointed out, swiping something from a jar across my forehead. It tingled sharply, and I tried to pull out of her grip.

The other witch was suddenly behind me, hands on my face. She grabbed my chin as Colette took a vial from her that she held in front of my lips.

“Don’t make this harder,” she said, her words too kind for her actions.

I clamped my mouth shut, teeth pressed together, and shook my head from side to side in an attempt to get the witch to let go.

Instead, she pinched my nose shut, still gripping my chin.

I fought her, unwilling to open my mouth even as black spots danced in front of my eyes. I would *not* let them do this. Panic made my heart race and my lungs screamed for oxygen.

The witch’s fingers dug into my jaws and I screamed in my throat, protests weakening.

Finally, it was too much. My body's need for oxygen won out and my mouth opened in a gasp. The witch was quick, her hand keeping my mouth open and head tilted back as Colette poured the liquid over my tongue.

Immediately I was trying to heave, shaking my head again even as the woman behind me clamped a hand over my nose and mouth, pulling me upright so I couldn't thrash.

"Swallow," she ordered.

I shook my head. She didn't let go, predictably, and tears streamed down my face as finally I was forced to swallow Colette's potion.

"I-won't-let-you-" I panted through clenched teeth as the witch untied my hands and Colette sympathetically wiped the tears from my cheeks.

"It's out of your hands now," the coven leader said kindly. "Just let fate run its course, my dear. Everything will work out.

Her words slurred together and her shape blurred. My head spun harder and harder as I tried to stay awake, whispering my own promises.

I won't let you. I'll never forgive you.

I won't let you hurt them.

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CHAPTER 24

Dreams overtook me immediately.

Blurred-at-the-edges memories, at first. Akiva's smile, Indra's touch. Then, Cian's kisses against my throat. Merric's grin and Yuna's light touch on my arm.

Aveline came next, memories of the past few days mixing with those from our childhood.

"Pick a card," her tongue poked out from her lips as she spoke, holding the tarot cards in a spread. The Aveline in my dream looked twenty-four, but this had happened when we were only seven or eight.

I gazed at her, eyes wide. "That's not how it works, Avi."

But my cousin only grinned. "Just pick. It'll work."

So I did-just as I remembered I had back then.

As a child, when this had happened, I had picked the four of cups. Aveline had grabbed our 'tarot for beginners' book and immediately read the definition out loud to me while I giggled.

Now, the card in my hand was the ten of swords. An omen of misfortune.

I looked up, but Aveline was gone.

I sat in Cian's house, on the floor in front of his sofa. Cards were spread around the floor at my knees, though my fingers still gripped the ten of swords.

"Cian?" I called, getting slowly to my feet. "Akiva? Indra?" I stepped over the cards, barefoot, and walked along the hardwood.

The kitchen was empty, and the door on the other side was locked. I turned, figuring I'd find them upstairs.

Indra stood in the doorway, clenching his stomach around a wound that bled sluggishly.

“What are you doing here?” the hellhound whispered.

My heart raced. I dropped the tarot card and sprinted forward, hands going to his. “Don’t talk!” I gasped. “Let me help you-“

“Help us?” he drew back, pushing me away as he did. “You abandoned us. You chose the witches, and now Cian is *dead* because of you.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t-I wouldn’t-“

“I thought you cared.” His eyes were wide and he continued to back up, scattering tarot cards as he did.

“I do-“ the moment I stepped forward, he was gone.

Everything was gone.

Now I was in Aveline’s house, standing in front of the television. Some dumb reality show played, though when I turned, I found that no one was here to watch it.

“Come join us, George!” Aveline beckoned from the table.

“Us?” I walked towards them, confused, and saw our kitchen table jam packed with people in masks and hoods. “Aveline, what the hell?”

She smiled at me, tears running down her face. Her wrists were wrapped in thin, glimmering chains and one of the figures beside her held the line connected to them.

She held tarot cards in her hands in a spread. “The coven is a good place for us. You were right, George.”

“No! No we aren’t joining the coven!” I drew back. “Aveline get up!”

She shook her head. “I can’t. You made that decision for us, when you stayed with them instead of helping Cian. Isn’t this what you want?” She reached outward, nodding at the cards. “Pick a card, George!”

I reached out automatically, picking a card.

The Ten of Swords.

“No. *No!”* I threw it down on the table. “Get up! Get up so we can leave!”

Aveline only smiled and cried.

Turning on my heel, I ran to the front door and threw it open.

There was nothing. Only blackness, but I wasn’t able to stop myself in time and I fell, screaming, as my mind seemed to close around me one more.

“Aveline!” I screamed, just as my knees landed hard on a wood floor.

Tarot cards surrounded me.

The Ten of Swords was in my hand.

I was in Cian's house.

"No!" I threw the card to the floor and stood, this time running up the stairs instead.

I didn't make it far.

Akiva sat at the top of the stairs, head in his hands.

"Go away," The lich breathed, not looking at me. "Just go away, George. Haven't you done enough?"

"I didn't-Akiva I would never-"

He laughed humorlessly. "We're all dead because of you. Why couldn't you just tell us the witches were helping Lucia? Why couldn't you warn us?"

"I want to!" I cried. "Please believe me. I want to warn you-I want to get out of here and help you!" I knelt down beside him, pulling his arms down from his face.

He held something in his hands. It shifted in my vision. A bottle. A box. A jar.

A *phylactery*.

"Akiva…" I barely whispered the words. "Is that-"

"It's my soul," Akiva said in agreement.

"Why are you holding it?"

"Because without Cian and Indra, I'm already dead anyway." His fingers tightened around it and I heard the glass crack.

"No! Akiva don't-" I reached out, but I was too late to do anything. The phylactery broke, a wisp of white escaping it.

Akiva slumped back against the wall, stiller than I'd ever seen him.

I stumbled, nearly falling down the steps as I opened the front door to get out of here-

Right into our living room where the same reality show flickered on the television.

Tears ran down my face. I heard voices again, and once again my cousin called for me to join them.

I couldn't. I couldn't *do* this.

"Wake up," I begged, sinking down into a crouch and covering my head amidst Aveline's more insistent calls. "Please George, please wake up. This isn't *real*. It's just a dream-you just need to *wake up!"*

Nothing happened.

Something touched my arm but I ignored it. I couldn't do this again. The touch returned, something pressing against my arm insistently.

"Go away," I hissed, eyes closed. "Please-I just need you to go away."

Whatever it was scoffed, and finally I did peek out of the gap of my arms to see what new nightmare was waiting to confront me.

It was a fox.

Not a normal fox, I realized, as nine tails dragged the floor behind it. This fox was white, with black tipped-ears and gleaming white fur.

Yellow eyes stared at me, unimpressed.

"Not you too," I moaned. "There's no way this will affect you, Merric. How are you in my nightmares?"

The fox scratched my arm and I yelped, surprised that I could even feel pain in a dream.

He turned, beckoning me with a ripple of his tails.

This couldn't get worse, I reasoned, and sitting on the floor of my dream living room wasn't helping. I stood and followed the fox's waving tails as he walked slowly and pointedly down my hallway, paws testing the floor in front of him as if something might give way.

"What are you doing?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

The fox turned into my bedroom, pushing my door ajar with his small, pointed nose.

I went to it, surprised to find the door difficult to open, like I was pushing it through water.

In the end, I had to put all of my weight against it and *shove*.

When it opened, I stumbled into my room unceremoniously, almost falling on my face with a gasp.

But this was not my room.

This was the coffee shop, where I'd originally met Merric.

Rain pounded on the windows as I let the door close behind me. No one stood at the counter, but the smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted through the air.

Turning, I found that Merric stood at the window, in his true half-shifted form again, and stared out at the rain.

For a moment he didn't speak; I was afraid of dream-Merric almost as much as the real Merric.

"This isn't your dream," the kitsune said, as if reading my mind.

“Yes it is,” I replied.

He looked at me shrewdly, mouth hitched in a half grin. “No, it’s not. If it was, shouldn’t I be bleeding or throwing cards at you? Shouldn’t I be blaming you for leaving me?”

“You don’t even like me that much,” I pointed out, confused. For some reason, I wasn’t afraid or as anxious as I had been. It was as if I could think more clearly here.

I also remembered exactly what had happened to get me into my crazy-loop of dreams.

“If this isn’t my dream, where are we?” Gingerly I sat down on a bench, folding my arms as I stared at him.

“It is a place I made, just for this. I almost brought you back to *my* dream, but you wouldn’t have liked that much.” He threw me a grin, though he didn’t try for his normal façade. “Everyone is looking for you.”

My eyes narrowed. “It hasn’t been that long, has it? A few hours since she put me to sleep?”

The fox’s gaze turned sharp. “George, you’ve been missing for *three days*. Your cousin called Cian two days ago, thinking you were with them. He called Yuna and me yesterday.”

Three days?

I jumped to my feet. “You have to get a message to them-you have to tell them that Lucia plans for them to be dead in four days and the witches are helping her. Please tell me you’re the real Merric-*please*.”

He didn’t reply immediately. A tail wrapped around my waist, keeping me from moving closer or further away.

“I can’t find you,” he said finally. “Everyone is looking, but no one can find you. Do you know where you are?”

I thought back to the room. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I didn’t see any of it except for the room.”

“That’s incredibly helpful of you.”

“Just warn them, *please*,” I begged again. “And you’ll still help them, won’t you-“

“They aren’t the issue right now.” He yanked me to him with his tail suddenly, causing me to stumble forward until he caught me. One hand reached up to my forehead, then he yanked it away with a hiss. “None of us can find you.”

“Why?”

“There’s some kind of magic on you. Something powerful. It’s keeping anyone from knowing where you are.” He hesitated. “Can you get out?”

“*I can’t even wake up*.”

“Then I can’t help you.” The words were simple, and he shrugged. “Who took you, then?”

“The witches,” I said. Finally, a question I could answer. A thread of hope twined itself around my heart. If they knew that much, then hopefully they could figure out the rest.

Merric’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“The witches!” I snapped impatiently. “You know-“

“Stop. I can’t understand you.”

“What do you mean you can’t understand me?”

“I mean, whenever you try to tell me, all I hear is gibberish. That’s very *thorough*.” He looked back out into the rain. “I can’t help you,” he said again.

“But you-you have *nine tails*!” I was raging now. “You’re powerful! Why can’t you wake me up?”

“Because this has nothing to do with me.”

The rain was becoming louder and the coffee shop was growing dimmer and blurred at the edges.

“Tell me how to wake up!”

“I don’t know, George. You’ll have to figure it out yourself.”

“No-No please you can’t leave me here. I can’t do this.” I pleaded.

He raised a brow, no hint of sympathy anywhere on his face. “Then you won’t wake up, and your friends will have to face Lucia without you.”

My heart sped up. “But you’ll help them, right? You *promised*.”

Now he grinned. “I promised *you*. And if you aren’t there, then there’s no reason for me to be either.”

“You can’t do that!” I took a step towards him, and he only watched. “You promised! You have to help them, Merric!” When I reached out for him, he was gone.

I was back on a hardwood floor, with tarot cards under me, and the Ten of Swords in my hand.

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CHAPTER 25

I screamed. At the same time, I chucked the card to the floor, only to pick it up a second later just to tear it in half.

It disintegrated.

"*I want to wake up!"* I yelled to the universe, wishing that would make it so.

Something sounded from the kitchen. When I looked up, Indra stood there *just as he had before*. How many times had I done this now?

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"*Shut up! Shut up SHUT UP!"* I jumped to my feet, teeth elongated as I threw a lamp to the floor.

He didn't speak.

I was beyond much rational thought now; being part werewolf meant I got the joys of heightened emotions and reactions if I wasn't careful. Usually, I was careful. My wolf side was more carefully buried, after all, and I'd spent years playing the witch while hiding the wolf.

But not now.

I screamed again, loud and impossibly long. Akiva sat at the top of the stairs, having not yet started *his* little speech.

"I'm going to WAKE UP!" I screamed to both of them, seeing them both stare at me with empty eyes. It had been three days when Merric had spoken to me, but time seemed to move much differently in my dreams than it did in the real world.

How long ago was our meeting in the dream coffee shop?

Something red hot burned at the edges of my vision making me squint. I inhaled, and smelled dirt.

Dirt?

The world around me blurred, though when I tried to calm down enough to focus on it, the edges sharpened and Indra staggered towards me again.

Was the reality of the dream I was trapped in linked to something in *me*?

My temper flared-it was easy, worked up as I was-and I screamed at Indra again, though this time it trailed into a snarl.

He vanished.

When I looked up, Akiva too was gone.

But this was dangerous territory. If I let myself get any more worked up, I could very easily push myself into a tantrum that would set my wolf free on a rampage.

But what if that was the only way to wake up?

Rational thought was irritating. The wolf side of me that my father had passed down wanted to come out to play *now*. Not the soft, fuzzy ears and long white tail. No. The other part. The huntress, who took down prey and rivals both. The animal that every were-creature had to fight to control, lest they be labeled feral or bestial.

Just a little, I cautioned myself, feeling my wolf rising. *Just a little, George. Just to wake up.*

Unfortunately, there was no *just a little* when it came to my wolf.

Like dunking myself in scalding water, I was suddenly burning with rage.

How *dare* these witches think to control me? To bind my magic and put me in a sleep?

Who did they take me for?

George-the-witch drowned in the tumultuous ocean of George-the-werewolf, and I bared my fangs at the darkening space around me, ears flicked forward and tail stiff.

My rational side made one last plea for reason, just as everything went dark once more and I regained consciousness.

IF I HAD BEEN THINKING CLEARLY, I WOULD'VE KNOWN INSTANTLY THAT I'D gone too far.

My vision was off. The room was too bright, even in the darkness, and colors were muted. Every little sound found my sensitive ears, and when I stood up from a cot on the floor, it was on four legs instead of two.

Thunder sounded, making my ears twitch, and I found that the door was open. How stupid of them, to not be more careful.

In an instant I was out, and found myself in a darkened hallway that led upward.

A man stood at the end of it, doing something on his phone.

It was too late by the time he looked up, hand upraised in a futile attempt to stop me.

My fangs broke his skin, choking his screams. Bone splintered between my sharp teeth, the feeling foreign but distantly familiar at the same time. It had been years since my wolf had taken over. Now I could see from her eyes, but her actions were not my own.

Hot blood filled my mouth, leaking down my jaws and neck as I dropped the witch to the ground.

Blood trickled from his mouth as he gurgled. He stared at me in absolute horror, eyes going dark, and I wasn't sure he could even see me. No matter. He shuddered again, drawing one last breath before his eyes clouded and he lay still.

I watched, licking at the hot, coppery blood on my jaws in satisfaction

He was prey, and now he was dead.

The only other door in the long hallway creaked open, a young woman taking a step back from it. Her mouth fell open and I took a step towards her, my wolf ready to show her just where she resided on the food chain.

Memories flashed through my head. The coffee shop; had that really been so long ago? *I knew her.* She had warned me, right? She'd been outside my cell, eyes pleading as if she'd wanted to help but couldn't. *Siobhan.* That was her name.

"PLEASE!" SHE GASPED, STUMBLING BACK WITH HER HANDS UP. "I DIDN'T want any of this-I didn't do this-"

I licked my jaws as I walked out of the underground bunker and into a dense forest clearing. Thunder rumbled from the sky above us, faint light patterning the grass under my paws.

"We didn't want to-it's only Colette's family that agreed to help the vampires." She was still talking, and there was just enough of me left to listen. Barely. "None of *us* will stop you."

She still held her hands up, looking terrified. Her fear-scent made my nose wrinkle.

She had warned me, or tried, I screamed to my wolf-thoughts. Siobhan wasn't worth my fangs.

Voices made me look up, and I found two people coming towards us, nightblind in the dark. They drew my wolf's attention away from Siobhan, probably saving her life.

I lunged, my weight knocking the woman to the ground and biting through her throat just as I had the man in the tunnel.

The man with her screamed, backing up and whipping out a crystal on a chain.

Magic assaulted me, trying to break through my fury and push me back. The spell battered against my white fur, not managing to sink into my pelt.

It wasn't very strong magic.

He lay dead next to the witch moments later.

All the while, my witch-self fought with my wolf for control. For rationality. For *reason.*

But with every one of Colette's witches that confronted me and tried to halt my escape, the wolf won out just a little more.

I came to a stop at last, finding no more living witches in the clearing after the five I'd killed. All of them, save Siobhan, had tried to stop me. They'd tried to hurt me, to put me back in that hole. They didn't understand that it drove my wolf to strive ever harder against them; to frenzy with the need for their blood on our teeth.

My sides heaved and I scanned the woods around me for movement. When I could breathe normally again I inhaled deeply, tasting the scents of the forest and the storm on the back of my tongue. Colette's scent was here, but it was old.

I wanted-*needed* to find her. I wouldn't be satisfied until she was dead and my fur had gained another coat of crimson paint.

I wavered once more; was that really what I wanted? To hunt her like a literal animal and kill her?

The answer ended up being a resounding yes, and just like that, my witch-self lost the battle with my wolf.

Everything changed. Priorities shifted and I tilted my head back to howl. Nothing answered me, predictably, and when I tried to remember what had me so anxious…I couldn't.

I existed *only* to hunt down the witch who'd tried to control me. Anger burned the image in my mind, chasing out everything else as I began to run.

She'd been here at some point; her scent wasn't fresh, but she'd been here. And, judging by the way her scent drifted into the trees, she hadn't driven away. She'd walked.

She was somewhere in these woods, and I would find her. I stepped into the trees, ears pricked and alert as I left the clearing and the sounds of Siobhan trying to start her car far behind me.

Something nagged at me-wasn't there something I had to do? Wasn't there somewhere I needed to be?

But every time I tried to remember, Wolf pushed the thoughts away. Things like that weren't important, to a wolf. There was only *now*.

So I stopped trying to remember, and gave into the alluring pull of my wolf.

The rain had lessened by the time I had found what I was looking for. Thunder still rumbled, interspaced with the lightning that lit up the sky. I didn't know how long it had been. Hours, maybe? It was so difficult to track time when that was not important to my wolf.

A familiar scent tickled at my nose. It was clearer than it had been so far, and that meant she couldn't be much further. I dropped into a belly crawl, my eyes tracking movement between the trees ahead of me.

Chickens picked about an enclosure in a small grotto.

A cat scrambled from a tall wooden fence to the roof, fur bristling.

My paw splashed into a puddle and looked down, gazing at the reflection of my bloodstained face.

I studied myself for a moment.

Very little remained of George the Witch. The eyes of the wolf were sharp and impartial. The bloodstained fur lent me a bestial look, and the rain had flattened and slicked my fur down.

But even that couldn't shock me out of my state.

I crept forward once more, then paused, my ear swiveling to focus on the forest behind me.

What was that?

Movement caught my eye, no more than a flicker.

But I stood, rounding on the noise with bared teeth. This was *my hunt*! I wouldn't let anything in the forest interfere.

My paws were light on the ground, eyes searching the dark forest around me. The sound that had drawn me was gone, and I couldn't see anything out there. Had I been mistaken? Was it some trick of the witches to pull me away from them?

That thought brought my anger bubbling right back to the surface and I turned, teeth bared, back to the cabin.

Suddenly the pawsteps returned, and when I turned again I saw a shape barrel towards me, the canine snapping its fangs close to my throat.

Black fur and ember-like eyes were all I could make out before I snarled, pouncing forward. This was *mine!* No others were welcome here while I was *hunting!*

The wolf-like shape danced out of reach. It was larger than me, and familiarity tickled my nose. My wolf shouldered her way back, disregarding the scent. It wasn't *important* right now! We could sort this out later, when the coven leader was dead.

But the other creature didn't understand propriety. It danced in again, tongue lolling playfully, and snapped at my leg. I lunged once more, teeth nearly closing on its tail as it suddenly jumped onto my shoulders and pushed me down. Teeth flashed but it only snapped its jaws close to my face, then took off, tail disappearing in the dark.

It was enough to draw my full ire and I snarled, taking off in the darkness after it. How *dare* this other creature interrupt! Didn't it understand what I was? What I could do?

Paws slammed heavily onto the forest floor as I ran, chasing the black-furred creature first one way, then another. There was no need for stealth; the animal wasn't trying to hide from me. It rounded a large tree and I did the same, losing it for a moment in the darkness.

Then, my eyes landed on the large dog as lightning illuminated the glade it had found. The canine stood still, panting, and made no move to stop me as I sped towards it with a loud, challenging growl.

No, it looked like it wanted me to come.

The thought barely struck me as strange and my mind could only focus on showing this creature the mistake it had made in interrupting my hunt. I would kill the witch after; for now I had eyes only for him.

I hit the edge of the glade at a run, seeing the dog lick his lips and crouch slightly. Would he run? Would he realize that I was here to tear out

his throat and *run*? The idea of hunting him excited my wolf and I forced myself to run faster, my movements edged with glee.

But he didn't run. He stood there, and when I lunged for him he did the same towards me, a roar exploding from his throat as fire suddenly licked at his form and his skin glowed under his fur like embers. Smoke billowed from his mouth, eyes wild and filled with fire.

The sight shocked me, fear suffusing me and I scrambled to cut off my attack.

Another shape blurred in my peripheral vision just as something knocked me to the ground, grip like iron around me as the *human* used his strength to pin my writhing, snarling form to the ground.

Was it the *witch*? Did she think this would work again? That I would allow her to control me-to subdue me once more?

"*George!"* I knew that voice. The voice that kept trying to get my attention while the hellhound circled us nervously, all traces of flame and ember gone.

I needed to get free. I *had* to get free. Fear rose in my throat, painting my movements with desperation as I fought to get free. I tore a claw on the ground, the pain going unnoticed.

"Akiva, do something!" the person roared.

"I don't think that's a good idea." A bird shrieked, agreeing with the man's words. "I don't think she's going to like it if I work magic on her."

"Well I don't think she likes *me* very much right now, either."

I *knew* that voice. I knew them and-and there was something important I was forgetting. There had to be.

There was more past the hunt, past killing the witches. More past the *here* and the *now*. There had been something before I'd shifted. A reason I'd let myself get this far.

The hellhound was there again, pressing his face against mine, and when he pulled back a second later, he shifted to his human shape..

"I'm sorry I scared you." He reached a hand out to me, but I snapped at him. He only twisted his fingers away from my fangs.

"Indra…" The man pinning me down murmured a warning.

Images pelted my eyes. *Indra* in his kitchen, holding a wound on his stomach. *Akiva* on the stairs, phylactery crushed in his hand.

My heart clenched painfully, stomach dropping past sea level, and I lost my grip on my wolf form.

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CHAPTER 26

"*Indra*?" I gasped, the person pinning me to my stomach moving so he could lift me to my knees. "No-*no!"* I shook my head, trying to pull away. "Not again-I want to *wake up!"* Had this been part of my dream? Had *all of this* been part of that? My escape? Them finding me? I raised my hands, covering my head and digging my fingers into my hair. "*Please* I just want to wake up-"

"You are awake." Akiva dropped to his knees in front of me, gripping my arms and pulling them away from me. "George, this is real. I'm real-"

"You killed yourself," I argued. "I've seen you do it-because I didn't help you-because I didn't warn you. I saw you crush your own *soul* because Cian is *dead!"*

Confusion trailed over his features. "Cian's fine. Look-he's fine. Indra's fine. I'm fine."

Arms curled around my shoulders, pulling me back against a warm chest.

"I'm fine," Cian promised, resting his head on my shoulder.

"What about Aveline? Is she-did the coven-"

"Aveline is *fine*," Indra spoke. "She's the one who found you. She said that Merric suggested she scry for you again, and when she did, she found you out here."

"Merric. I saw him too but…it was *actually* him, I think?"

"He told us you were asleep," Cian confirmed. "But he couldn't tell us who had taken you."

Anger surged in me at his last words and suddenly I was half shifted once more.

“No!” Indra gripped my face in his hands. “Don’t shift! You have to calm down.”

“She’s-out-here-“ My voice was a loud snarl. “I *found* her and-and you want me to just *walk away*?”

“Who?” He didn’t understand, but I could only snarl, mouth open as my wolf tried to fight to the surface once more. I wouldn’t let her. I was back in control now, and intended to stay that way.

“George I am *asking* you to calm down,” Cian said. “Don’t make me go past asking.”

I tried, sucking in deep breaths and willing my fangs to go away. “It was the witches,” I explained. “They made a deal with Lucia. She’d let them keep me alive as long as I couldn’t help you, if the witches help *her*. She said you’d all be dead in a week.” I opened my eyes, gaze fixed on Akiva. “How long have I been missing?”

“Almost five days,” the lich said, trading a look with the bird on his arm.

I shivered, realizing for the first time how *freezing* I was, drenched in rain and completely naked. Indra noticed, offering me his unzipped hoodie that I gratefully accepted and shrugged on.

“Come on.” Cian stood, dragging me up with him, and picked me up in his arms, earning an indignant yelp from me.

“I can walk!” I protested, eyes still bright.

“Yeah, and if I let you walk, then you’re going to go somewhere you shouldn’t,” the vampire retorted.

I sucked in a breath, eyes closed, and tried not to let my temper flare. “How did you find me? Aveline couldn’t be spot on.”

“Indra and Horus tracked you. We’ve been following you for awhile,” Akiva admitted. He stroked over his familiar’s feathered head. “Trying to figure out how to approach you.”

“Oh.” I was *tired*. Which was stupid, as I’d been asleep for five days. But here I was. After a moment I rested my head on Cian’s chest, tipping my chin up to look at the sky through the trees. “I’m happy none of you are dead,” I said finally, struggling with the words. “But…less happy that you won’t let me kill Colette for *some reason*.”

“Because that’s not you,” Cian said. “You don’t strike me as the kind of person to kill indiscriminately.”

My hand tightened against his shirt. That wasn't true. I'd killed five witches already tonight.

But I didn't say that. I instead spent the rest of the walk to Cian's car studying the clouded sky.

When Cian let me down, Indra handed me a blanket that I wrapped around myself. "I'm going to get your car dirty," I said quietly.

"It can be cleaned," the vampire intoned, watching me until I sat down in the back seat. I twitched my nose in irritation, but slid in to sit beside Indra, our knees touching.

"Don't let me go to sleep," I ordered, glaring at the hellhound.

"Why?" he asked, reaching out a hand. I pulled away from him, drawing my knees up as I leaned against the window.

"Just don't let me sleep," I said again.

"If that's what you want." His tone was confused, but agreeable.

Two minutes later, I was asleep.

I ran through the forest, blood bright in my vision as I killed faceless witches. Outside the tunnel there had been so many of them, and I needed them *dead*. How dare they capture and confine me? How *dare* they think themselves my equals?

Over and over I proved to them that wasn't the case. Over and over their terrified faces and pleading cries did nothing to assuage my rage as I ripped them apart

Finally I came upon a lake, staring down at myself in the water. Bloodstained and bright eyed; I was nothing if not terrifying.

But was this me?

"This is becoming *not* amusing."

I turned to see Merric behind me, tails splayed around him as he sat on a throne-like chair. When I studied it, he grinned. "This is your dream, I'm just making it more comfortable. What are you *doing*? Or do you plan on sleeping it all away?"

Shifting back, I was happy that dream-me kept her clothes. "What do you mean?" It upset me to realize I was dreaming. Hadn't I asked Indra to keep me awake? I'd have to take it up with him later.

He fixed me with a dry look. "Who cares if you killed the ones who imprisoned you? Weren't they just going to *kill* your vampire and his lovers, anyway?"

“But it’s not right,” I breathed. “To kill people. My family-“

“From the way I hear it, your *family* is nothing any longer. What sway do they have over you-a hybrid of *summoner* and *white wolf*?” His eyes were goading and his tails rippled.

My mouth quirked into a half grin. “Is this your idea of a pep talk, Merric? Because frankly, it’s terrible.”

“Is that what you need?” he asked, voice sickly sweet. “Do you need me to tell you it’s okay? That you’re still a good person? That we’re *all here for you*, George?” Eyes never leaving mine, he smirked scornfully. “I didn’t think you were so pathetic. Perhaps I’m wasting my time with you.” He considered it, then snorted. “You know what, George-“ He stood. “Forget the whole *debt* thing. What could I get from you, anyway? You can’t even get past your own sins to save the people you care about. It must get tedious, having them save *you* all the time.”

His words stung.

“That’s not true-“

“Isn’t it?” He stepped towards me. “The Troublesome Trio brought you with them to save you from being unable to help your cousin. Yuna *saved* you in the cemetery. I *saved* you at the warehouse. Do we even need to get into last night? But tell me again how it’s *not true*.” His eyes blazed challengingly.

I stared at him.

He was right. Everyone *had* been saving me. Even last night.

“Are they right, George?” His voice was quiet, and silky tails wrapped around us, enclosing us from my dream world. There had to be more than nine, with the way they wove together and interlocked to shut out everything else. The fur acted as a furry barricade between us and everything else and I could see nothing past the fluffy white. It would have been suffocating, if Merric hadn’t been in the furry prison with me.

“Are they right, when they tease you for your bad decisions and your lack of skill? You can read fortunes, only you don’t heed them. You found me, only you didn’t know how bad of an idea it was. You’re here, letting people care for you, and to what end? So you can let them down? So you can sit back and let them take care of things while you *throw a tantrum* in the woods?” he sneered the words and my stomach clenched.

“No-no I’m not-“

“So keep at it, *George*. They’re already discussing where to *leave you* so you’ll be safe. You can’t hear them, but I can. It’s been six days since you went missing, and you know they might not survive the night. But what do you care? They’ve saved you so many times….what’s a few times more?”

“I don’t want them to save me,” I breathed.

“Yes you do.”

“No I don’t!” I yelled, but I was in control of myself this time. “I’m *not* useless! I don’t *need* you all to save me anymore!” I grabbed one of his tails, throwing it off my waist as his grin widened.

“And you *are* going to help me! I won’t let you out of our deal, do you understand?” When his tails pulled back, I found that we were in my room, not the forest any longer.

“Then you better hurry up,” Merric advised. “Because you’re running out of time, and so are they.”

“I *will* find a way to help,” I promised.

His eyes glittered. “I suppose we shall see.”

He disappeared, just as my eyes opened and I sat up with a gasp.

I was in my bedroom. The sun shone bright through my window, painting bars of light on my bed and I looked around almost frantically.

Everything was how I’d left it.

My thigh bag sat on the dresser, and my phone was plugged in beside my bed.

I grabbed it, swiping the screen to see my missed messages. Had they left me something? Anything, in case I woke up and wanted to come help?

Cian’s was at the top of the list, and it had just been sent to me a few hours ago.

Don’t worry about us. Just focus on feeling better. We can take care of this ourselves, and we’ll let you know when everything is done.

I’m sorry for putting you in danger.

The words *burned* me and I dropped my phone onto my bed. The crystals at the base of my bed winked in the sunlight, drawing my resigned gaze. He was gone. He didn’t trust me to help. None of them did.

Cian always made it so easy by saying things like that. He was giving me a way out-again-and made it seem like I wasn’t a part of this.

“Oh hey, you’re up.” Aveline stepped into the room, smiling. “I thought you’d sleep longer-“

“Where are Cian and the others?” I asked, looking up at her.

She hesitated. “They asked me not to tell you anything.”

My eyes narrowed. “*What?”*

“They aren’t mad, but after what happened they don’t want to put you in any more danger.”

“That’s not fair!” I stood up and grabbed my robe to tie around myself. I was still bloody and very much needed a shower.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s for the best,” Aveline hedged. “You uh, had a really bad few days.”

“And?” I snapped.

“And maybe this is more their level than yours.”

I stopped, turning to look at her slowly. She met my gaze levelly, unflinching. “You really think that?”

Aveline nodded. “Yeah, I do. Just let them handle it, and then we can all get together at *Euphoric* again.”

Looking in the mirror, I was shocked to see Merric in the corner, gazing at me curiously.

When I turned, however, there was no one there.

“You’re wrong,” I said at last, turning back to the mirror.

Merric smiled, then vanished.

She shrugged. “Wrong or not, I don’t know where they are. What are you going to do, drive around looking for them?”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t answer. Hadn’t I walked around New Orleans looking for her when she was in trouble? Hadn’t I gone to a bayou with vampires to *save her*? What level had that been on? “I’m going to take a shower,” I announced at last.

She visibly relaxed. “Good. Okay. I’ll start making something to eat and we can watch something, okay?” When I didn’t answer, she prodded, “George?”

“Whatever.” That wasn’t okay. That was not what I’d be doing.

I needed a plan, and this time I was going to make sure that it didn’t end up backfiring in my face.

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CHAPTER 27

I showered quickly, scrubbing blood and forest dirt from my body while my mind raced. Part of me whispered arguments; that Cian and the others would be fine. That they'd survived this long without me, so why did they need me now?

Perhaps that was true, but I wasn't going to leave them to it to find out.

If I did, and they *did* manage to make it through the night, I could never face them again.

Fear warred with my resolve. I'd never done anything like this; had never *killed* anyone before yesterday. But I had to make a choice. Did I sit here, regret it, and wallow in my self-pity?

Or did I move the fuck on?

Did Cian care if he killed someone? Did Yuna? Merric obviously did not, and apparently didn't see why I did either.

He was right, I reasoned. My wolf hadn't just decided to crunch their bones for no reason. They'd kidnapped me, with intentions of keeping me there against my will. I hadn't been convinced I'd ever be able to leave, with Colette in charge. What was to stop her from keeping me in the coven?

The memories from my tantrum in the forest were hazy and rushed; it was difficult to remember everything when my wolf took over.

Ideally, that part of me never took over.

But hadn't that helped me? Hadn't the white-hot rage of my werewolf gotten me out of the witches' lair and back home so I could warn-and help-my friends?

Maybe the iron control I held over my wolf, enough to push her down at most times and keep those emotions carefully in control, wasn't the right

way.

But that was another problem for another day. I wasn't going to consider any lifestyle changes until this crisis had been averted.

I could hear Aveline in the kitchen rustling about the cabinets and banging a few of them. As she seemed pretty immersed in whatever she was doing, I was able to pad quickly back to my room. The tv volume blared, a weather reporter talking about *strange weather patterns of the northeast*. What was with all the weather reports recently?

Aveline didn't approve of my actions. It stung, but at this point was reasonable. Unfortunately, that wouldn't work for me. She didn't need to help, I supposed, but she wasn't going to stop me.

Once I'd toweled off, I pulled clothes from my closet: snug jeans, a loose tank top, and flat boots that laced to my knees.

I wasn't *trying* to 'stick to theme,' as Cian had called it, but as most of my clothes were black, it was hard to put much variation in my outfits. Finally I pulled on fingerless gloves and a scarf that fit snugly around my neck and could be pulled up over my mouth and nose.

My still-wet hair was pulled back into a slick ponytail. I hated the feeling of it brushing my shoulders, but It didn't matter; this was the most convenient and I didn't want to spend time drying it.

I grabbed my thigh back from the bedside table and dumped the contents onto the floor before sinking down next to its contents.

Both decks fell out, and I shoved everything else to the side before snatching my favorite.

After a brief hesitation, I picked up two crystals and dumped them on the floor in front of me.

Pulling the deck from its box, I tapped my fingers against the heavy cards, doing so pointedly and channeling my magic into them.

I needed them to be as accurate as possible today.

Next, I put my hands over the crystals. While I was no geomancer or particularly skilled using crystals, I knew how to use them to channel.

I flooded them with magic, feeling the power leave my hands in waves of small, pulsing shocks across my skin.

When I put them on the floor on either side of my deck, they resonated with each other, the amethyst mineral lit from within.

Between them, all magic was caught and sent back into the spell I was working. Or, in this case, the reading.

Next, I shuffled my deck. First the mortal way, then I held my hands to the side, movements careful, and drew the cards between them, overlapping, and shuffled them again.

While I was not telekinetic, these cards held so much of *me* in them that I could call them to my hand, just like calling back a piece of myself. Any experienced reader with a favored deck could do the same.

Biting my lip, I spread the cards in an arc in front of me and focused on my question; pressing it to the forefront of my mind and envisioning my request just behind my eyes.

There were many three card spreads in Tarot that I had learned. Past, Present, Future was perhaps the most known and the most practiced, but it wouldn't serve me here.

Instead, I had another in mind. One where the three cards represented *where* the universe wanted me to be, the personal qualities required, and what awaited me at my destination.

Unfortunately, Tarot readings weren't an *ask and ye shall receive step-by-step-instructions* deal. This kind of magic-or any magic, really-didn't operate in such black and white terms.

I would have to bend the reading to suit my needs, and work to see what was important, and what was not.

The card backs were plain in my sight, for the most part. Normally I was content to pull something that piqued my interest and go from there, but this time I focused on Cian's smile, on Akiva's laugh, on Indra's kindness. I willed thoughts of them into my cards as if to impart their importance on the faceless objects.

A long, slow breath left me.

Where the Universe wanted me to be.

The card backs stared stoically up at me, patterns of moons and stars swirled over the dark surface. Except one. One of them, to me, seemed to just be a bit more present. Like it was pushed out of my relatively even spread suggestively.

I don't belong here, the card seemed to whisper to me as I turned my gaze to it.

Immediately I slid it out of the pile and to a spot above the left side of the spread.

What personal Qualities would I require?

This time, there was no card that seemed to try to inch its way out of the spread. No, it was much more subtle this time. My eyes scanned the cards, finally stopping on one near the right edge. This card's golden design seemed to shine just slightly more than the others. Just enough to be eye catching.

I pulled it next, lying it above the spread in the center.

What awaited me at my destination?

I reached out, the thought in my mind, to hover my hand over the backs of my cards for inspiration.

But I never got that far.

In a completely new experience for me, one of my cards detached itself from my deck and plastered itself to my palm, pulling a gasp from my throat.

Instinctively my fingers curled lightly around the card, and I held it there, where it had come to me.

But there was absolutely no way to mistake this, so I laid it to the upper right of the spread.

Next I very carefully called the undrawn cards to my hand and laid them aside, before gazing at the backs of the three I had drawn.

First, I flipped the card on the left.

The Six of cups revealed, I stared at it.

Nostalgia. Revisiting the past.

My cards wanted me to be in the past? My mind jumped from one possibility to the other. Obviously that didn't mean literally. I understood that. But it meant something important.

Where had I gone that would solve the problem of where I needed to *be*?

I doubted anyone was dueling in the French Quarter. It was also unlikely that Cian's house or either of the clubs was a battleground for the preternatural tonight.

Apart from that, I'd been to a few diners, Marin's shop, the stupid cemetery-

My thoughts froze, though the possibilities seemed to slam into each other like a traffic jam when I stopped myself.

I was so dumb.

Revisiting the Past meant more literally than I'd thought. Where had I gone with my then-unknown allies to accomplish the means to save

Aveline?

The Bayou.

Where had the witches held their counsel?

The cemetery.

I flipped the second card, surprised to see The Magician smiling up at me, her face full of clandestine secrets while her hands hovered infinitely over the four suits of the tarot cards hovering around her.

Manifestation. Resourcefulness. Power.

This was perhaps a bit too vague for my liking, as this addressed my question of the personal qualities I would require. Power was a given. Resourcefulness was vague.

Manifestation?

My fingers pressed to the card and I felt the magic push back like the tide.

It was almost painfully obvious. What was manifestation, if not creating-or summoning-something? It meant that I would have to use my magic directly, not just to help out from the sidelines.

But then-was that ever even a real possibility?

My eyes closed for a moment and I sighed. The card that still remained concealed from me *radiated* chaotic magic that only I could sense. As if it was goading me to pick it up, turn it over, and puzzle out the meaning.

I had a very good hunch as to what I was going to find, and I wasn't going to like it much.

Instead of flipping the card with my hand, I gestured with two fingers over it in a sideways motion, causing the card to flip on its own.

"We really *must* stop meeting like this," I mumbled, head on my hand as I stared flatly down at the Ten of Swords.

If I hadn't known what it meant before this month, it was impossible not to now.

Painful Endings. Deep Wounds. Loss.

The man being stabbed seemed to be begging anyone looking at the card for help, all the while pinned to the card by the blades.

But had I been expecting anything different?

I picked up the cards, grabbing the first two easily enough, but when my hand touched the Ten of Swords, its magic *shocked* me.

It reminded me of when I'd first summoned the Major Arcana into my living room seven years ago.

Images assaulted my mind: memories from my time as a wolf. Only, these images were targeted, only the moments of killing the witches finding my mind.

Sight wasn't the only thing that I experienced. The taste of blood, the feeling of bones crunching in my jaws; the spattering of gore against my fur and the gurgling sounds of the dying. The fear on the faces of witches I ran towards, teeth bared and eyes blazing as they met their ends.

I pulled my hand back as if I'd been shocked by an outlet.

I'd *never* experienced anything like this from my cards before. Feelings or a sense of direction, yes. But for the Ten of Swords to come to *me* instead of the other way around? For my magic to *force* me to remember?

My head reeled.

What if I was wrong? What if the painful endings that the Ten of Swords of my readings and my dreams weren't prophesying *my* painful death?

What if the cards were warning me of the harm I would have to inflict upon other people?

In my mind, I would jump in, support my friends in their quest to rid us of the malcontent vampires, and help save the day. In my fantasy, it was surprisingly non-lethal.

But perhaps I had been kidding myself.

Perhaps, if I took this path and went along with this plan, I would be the one wielding the swords, not the one pinned to the ground asking for help.

You aren't a killer! I thought to myself. *And this doesn't make you a bad person.* It was justified. These people had come after us.

Something tickled my nose, and I had very recently learned not to ignore the feeling. Quickly I drew the Ten of Swords into my hand and set it away with the deck, looking up into my mirror.

In the reflection of my room, Merric lay on my sheets.

"How long have you been there?" I asked.

He didn't answer immediately. His white tails lay on my pillows and he lounged like a sultan on my frameless bed. It was nothing fit for royalty, but he made it much more impressive with his presence.

"I can't seem to decide about you today," the kitsune said airily, turning something in his hand that shone and caught the light. "Is it amusing, seeing how much you don't know? Or is it simply-"

“If you’re going to say pathetic, you can save it.” I got to my feet, buckling my thigh bag around my waist and grabbing my phone from the table beside the bed.

Of course, his real body wasn’t there.

“You’re very sure that’s what I wanted to say. Perhaps you’re projecting.”

“Perhaps you’re predictable,” I mumbled, sending off a quick text to Yuna that read, ‘*I’m about to make a bad decision.’*

Her reply was immediate.

Where should I meet you?

I paused, looking to Merric as if he knew what I’d said.

“I can’t read your phone from there,” the fox informed me. “I’m surely not psychic.”

“We’re going to the bayou. All *three* of us.” I glared at him as I said it. “Where do you want to meet me so I can pick you up?”

Merric considered my question. “I doubt your darling cousin is going to let you go without a very insistent argument,” he answered, not addressing my question. “What are you going to do? Will you really confront her directly?”

I stared at his face in the mirror. “Where do you want to meet?” I asked again.

“Tell the Cecaelia to meet you at the diner we ate at. I’ll be there too. But you know…” finally he looked at me, yellow eyes narrowed. “If we do this, you’ll owe me that unrestrained *debt*.”

“I don’t care. I told you before that I’d do it. Nothing has changed. I’m much more afraid of my friends getting killed and people paying for my mistakes than your stupid debt.”

“*Oh*?” His tone was almost offended. “I’ll have to remember that.”

Then he was gone.

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CHAPTER 28

When Merric was gone, I shoved my cards and crystals into my bag, grabbed my keys, and opened the door to my room.

Aveline stood there, mouth pressed into a line.

"I heard you talking to yourself," she informed me coolly.

"That's not entirely accurate," I admitted, but didn't elaborate.

"I'm not an idiot. And I know you better than you think." Arms folded over her chest, she blocked my doorway and my only escape.

"Fine. I'm leaving to go help my friends. Is that what you wanted to hear?" I made a flapping motion with my hands that didn't make her move, and scowled. "Are you going to *move*?"

"No," my cousin replied. "Do you know why?"

My scowl deepened. "Because you think I'm not strong enough to help anyone. Because you think I'm just going to get in the way, or someone's going to have to save me or *whatever*."

"No." She studied me, silent.

Now I tossed my hands in the air. "Then I don't know, Av! But I'm not going to stand here playing twenty questions with you."

"I told them you wouldn't stay put when you woke up. Do you remember when you were a kid and your mom would beg you to stay in the house because of your health?"

Her change of direction surprised me. "Yeah, so?"

"Do you remember what you did?"

"Of course I do-"

"Tell me what you did *every* time your mom tried to convince you to stay home."

“Well-when I wasn’t sick, I found a way out,” I said, not understanding what she wanted. My hands found the hem of my tank top and I worried it between my fingers, unsure.

“And?” She pressed.

“*And* what? I’d sneak out, call you, and we’d run off into the woods.”

Aveline’s lips pressed together once more. “Exactly.”

I didn’t see the point.

Was she trying to make some parallel? Trying to get me to remember some stupid lesson that I was sure I’d never learned back then? Or was she trying to say-

Oh.

“Well I’ve hardly even managed to sneak out yet.” A small grin curved over my lips. “It seems premature to throw rocks at your window just now.”

“Oh I see-I jumped the broom, then?” She held up her keys. “I’m driving.”

“You’re going to have passengers.”

“Are you implying my car isn’t good enough for your fuck buddies?”

I snorted and shoved her lightly. This time she moved back and followed me down the hallway.

“If I ever fuck that fox, you can *ground* me,” I promised. “And anyway-are you *sure* you want to go? We aren’t exactly going to go play in the woods until our moms drag us home.”

“Obviously. But you’re going to need my help. What’s your plan? Break down the door of wherever the witches are hiding and ask them to stop?” She snagged her Baphomet-headed backpack from the table and stepped outside to hold the door for me, then followed me to her vehicle.

When she started her car, I grabbed her bag from the floor behind her. “What’s in here?” I asked, surprised at how heavy it was.

“Look, George. I’m not an idiot. I wasn’t *cooking* while you were in the shower. *But*.” She turned to me, catching my eyes. “I was serious. I don’t think you-or I-can do much good for your friends. You really should let them handle it.”

I was not going to explain the intricacies of my newfound resolution and the fact that Yuna and Merric would only help if I helped as well.

“If you don’t want to come, I can still drive.” I opened the backpack curiously when she didn’t object, finding filled curio bottles and wrapped objects. “But I’m taking your arsenal with me.”

“I’m not letting you go alone,” my cousin informed me, putting her car in reverse and pulling out almost in front of another car. The person honked. Aveline cheerfully flipped them off.

“Where am I going?” She asked.

I told her the address of the diner we’d eaten at and she nodded.

YUNA STOOD ON THE SIDEWALK, ARMS CROSSED AND SCOWLING. THE Cecaelia was dressed similarly to me in ripped black jeans tucked into boots and a cropped black t shirt that hugged her chest. I didn’t see her sword on her, but I hadn’t the first time either.

The reason for her scowling was likely Merric. The kitsune stood beside her, bouncing on the balls of his feet when he saw us approach. I wasn’t sure how he knew it was us, as we weren’t in my SUV, but I wasn’t going to ask.

Two fluffy ears swiveled on his head and his twin orange tails waved behind him, hitting Yuna repeatedly. The fox wore a white v neck and jeans over running shoes.

The kitsune definitely stood out from the rest of us; Aveline in her black, belted dress and leggings included.

“Oh-“ I realized I hadn’t told her about him, as of yet.

The back doors of her car opened and both shifters got in.

“He’s got nine tails,” I gestured to Merric.

Aveline turned to me. “No he doesn’t. What the hell are you smoking?”

“Yeah, this whole act of his is, well, an act.”

Merric beamed. “That’s so rude-and at least forty-percent untrue. I am *so* friendly.”

“Why do you have to carry on when it’s just us?” Yuna asked, pressing her fingers to her temples. Aveline sped off once more. “We all know what you *are*, Merric.”

“He clearly has two tails,” My cousin argued.

“He *clearly* enjoys you thinking that,” I shot back.

Merric simply smiled, his tails still taking up too much of the seat for Yuna’s preference.

“Where are we going?” Aveline and the Cecaelia asked almost in unison.

“The first night I came here, I went with Cian and-“

“-The Troublesome Trio-“ Merric interjected. “It’s faster.”

“….The *Troublesome Trio* to the bayou. It was where Gavin was. Only- I’m not sure where it *is*.” My nerves were at an all time peak now and I worried at my shirt between my fingers.

“Oh wow George. That is just *so* helpful.” Predictably, it was Merric’s saccharine sweet reply that came first.

“What do you remember about it?” Aveline asked, ignoring the kitsune.

“After we left the cemetery, we walked to Cian’s car, which only took a few minutes. But then it was a half-hour drive out of the city.” I sighed, leaning my head against the window and trying hard to remember.

“There are multiple swamps outside of the city within that distance,” Yuna informed me. “And the sun is going down; we won’t have time to check more than one or two. Not to mention, they’re *huge*.”

“Can’t any of you find them?” I asked. I hadn’t tried scrying for them, as I’d had no time nor anything that belonged to them.

“It’d take me an hour to really look,” Aveline said slowly.

“I could, if they were in the water. But unless they’re dead and someone’s dumped their bodies, I very much doubt they’re swimming in the river,” Yuna went on.

I turned to glare at Merric, who sat behind Aveline.

The fox was smiling expectantly.

“Well…I might be able to,” he said innocently. “But I’d have to do it in a rush. Do you know how much magic that would take?” His muddy eyes widened as if he was trying to convince me.

“Stop.” Yuna looked at me, not him. “Don’t you dare-“

“What do you want?” I asked, eyes locked with his.

“George *do not* give him free reign *again*-“

“Same thing as before,” He said quietly. His eyes paled slowly to bright yellow as we spoke.

“What’s going on? What is he asking for?” Aveline asked nervously.

“Find them,” I murmured.

“Agree first. You have to *say it*.”

“I’ll owe you a debt. Same conditions as before.”

“That seems like a very bad idea,” Aveline said at the same time as Yuna’s snarled protest.

Merric snickered over both of them. “You’re going to Bayou Lafourche, Aveline,” he told my cousin.

My eyes narrowed. “You already knew where they were,” I accused. “You’re such a-“

“Good friend,” Merric agreed. “I came prepared. Isn’t that what you wanted from me, George?”

I had nothing to say to that.

“You shouldn’t have agreed to that,” Yuna snapped, sitting back against the grey interior as Aveline swerved onto the interstate. “You’ll regret it sooner rather than later, I’ll wager.”

Merric *giggled*, sitting back in his seat as well. “I’ll give you more specific directions when we get there,” he said. “Depending on how far they go.”

“Do you know who else is there?” I asked the kitsune carefully, a bit worried about the answer.

His eyes found mine and one brow rose as if to ask the quiet question I was already struggling with.

Finally he answered, putting me out of my misery. “I don’t know.” At my slight exhale of disappointment and relief both, he went on. “There *are* others in the bayou with them, I’m sure of it. But I will not be expending the magic it would take to identify each and every one, if you’re wanting me to help you when we get there. That would be irritating.”

“Can we stop asking the fox for things?” Yuna requested. “Because I’m going to be honest-I’m pretty sure that if I don’t pull you back here and keep my hand over your mouth for the rest of this trip, you’ll have promised him your soul before too much longer.”

“Why would he want my soul?” I asked, puzzled.

Yuna’s gaze was incredulous.

Merric seemed to be debating her statement. “On one hand, I want to see how much more I can get out of her,” he admitted. “On the other, that seems pretty hot, Yuna. I’d love to have a front row seat to watch you two wrestle.” He beamed at the cecaelia. She did not return the look with anything pleasant.

One day, I wanted to ask her why she wasn’t afraid of Merric like I was. Unless she was an ancient, deadly sea witch that could drown him on land, anyway. If that was the case, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“I am helpful though,” Merric pointed out. “You didn’t even know about the witches before I told you.”

“And I’d love to know just what we’re going to do about that.” Yuna folded her arms. “Ignore them? With two witches and a fox, *can* we ignore them?”

“No,” Aveline said flatly. “If they’re being helped by the coven-even just Colette’s family-we can’t just walk through their magic. Her sons are hexers. I wouldn’t be surprised if our limbs lock the moment we get to the bayou.”

I turned to look at her. “How do you know that?”

She glanced in my direction, lips pressed thin. “Because I joined the New Orleans Coven when I first moved here,” my cousin explained. “I thought it’d be like our family, you know? But it wasn’t.” Her tone was cold. “I’m telling you what I know. Colette has two children, both strong hexers.”

“So, she is too?” I reasoned. I didn’t want to deal with any hexes being thrown my way, but if I knew what was coming, I could at least try to prevent it. Or at the very least, not waste my energy trying to dodge their magic.

“*Colette Villere* is a ritualist,” Merric said with glee. Aveline glanced at him in the mirror and he smiled, all happy apologies. “Oh my gosh I am *so sorry* I ruined your thunder, Av.”

I glanced at him. “How do you know-“

“No.” Yuna’s hand shot forward, her warm palm pressing over my mouth. “Don’t even think about it. One more and I really *will* make good on my threat.”

The kitsune couldn’t look happier.

“What was that?” Merric asked, one ear swiveling dramatically in my direction.

I didn’t speak. Yuna’s hand dropped and she shot me a warning glare.

“She’s a ritualist,” Aveline agreed, her eyes on the road. “She’s incredibly strong, even if she is getting up there in years. I think you should let Cian handle her, honestly. Or Merric.”

“Pass,” the kitsune said lightly, making me want to rip my hair out. “Hey, why don’t you go take her down, George? After all, *you’re* the one she kidnapped and put into a messy little dream loop, right? Have we forgotten that already?”

Was it my imagination, or had his voice turned mocking?

I rubbed at an imaginary spot on my jeans, but didn’t reply.

“Let’s just find Cian and-“

“The Troublesome Trio,” Merric pressed.

“*Whatever.* Let’s just find the Troublesome Trio and go from there.” I didn’t say anything about the tarot reading I’d done, as I was sure it said nothing about me cheering on someone else as they took down the leader of the witches.

We were silent, none of us feeling the urge to speak as the city disappeared behind us.

“We’re almost there,” Aveline said finally. “Where am I going?”

Merric directed her quickly, unerringly routing her to a long gravel road that ended at a large fence with a sign hooked on it reading DO NOT ENTER in very bold letters.

“Well that’s subtle,” I muttered, as we got out of Aveline’s car. . “This isn’t the way we came in last time.”

The kitsune shot me a very patient look. “They’ve *moved* from the clearing they started in. Actually…” He looked up, eyes finding the darkening sky. “They’ve moved quite a bit. We’re closest to your lich.”

“They split up?” My heartbeat sped up. “Why would they do that?”

He shrugged.

“What’s the plan?” Yuna asked, sword in her hand. Where did she store it when she wasn’t holding it?

I realized she was asking *me*. Aveline, too, was looking at me.

Even Merric had his ears twisted in my general direction.

“We’re going to split up,” I said after a moment. “Who’s faster? You, or you?” I pointed to Yuna, then Merric.

They looked at each other curiously.

“Me,” Merric said at last. “Unless I’m mistaken.”

“He’s faster than me on land,” the Cecaelia agreed.

“Who’s the furthest from us?”

Another moment of deliberation. Then the kitsune said with certainty. “Cian.”

As he spoke, I started walking. The sun had all-but set, and the trees in front of us were shadowy and near-inscrutable.

With a thought, I half shifted to take advantage of my wolf’s senses instead of relying on my witch ones. I was the first over the gate, scaling it quickly and turning to help Aveline down. Yuna and Merric both cleared it with a jump, no climbing required.

“Point Yuna and us in the direction of Akiva and Indra,” I went on, striding through the trees. Aveline walked on my right, Yuna on my left. It didn’t shock me that Merric kept to himself even now. “Then go get Cian. We need to *meet up* somewhere.”

“I don’t need him to tell us where Akiva is,” Aveline interrupted. “I can hear him on the wind. He isn’t far.”

“Can we find each other, once we’re safe?” I asked. “We need to figure out what we’re doing *together*.”

“I would think the hellhound can sniff all of you out,” Yuna agreed. She walked in the direction Merric gestured for her to go, disappearing in the trees.

“See you soon,” Merric promised. In a sudden rush of magic that danced along my skin like a breeze, he shifted.

It was nothing like my own shift. The magic of being a shifter instead of a were meant that the person got to keep their clothes and their shift was instant.

My own was smooth and swift, but not magical.

A nine tailed white fox sprinted past us, only slightly larger than a real fox and incredibly quick. He lunged over logs, branches, and through the trees until finally his glimmering white coat vanished in the darkness.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, George,” Aveline breathed when they were gone. “And I really hope they’re worth it.”

“So do I,” I admitted quietly. “Come on. Let’s go save a lich.”

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CHAPTER 29

Even with my wolf's hearing it was a few minutes before I could make out the sounds of a struggle. We'd been jogging up until this point, trying to steer clear of natural obstacles and not fall into mud. Every so often, I would misjudge the distance of a low hanging vine or misstep to trip over a log or rock. Thank the goddess I had werewolf healing abilities.

After a few minutes of very *not* fun sprinting, I could hear the sounds of a fight. I urged my legs to go faster, noticing that Aveline slowed beside me, though a gust of wind buffeted me as I ran.

The trees thinned, and between them I could see movement. I sucked in a relieved breath, eyes on my lich, but that relief lasted barely half a second.

"Akiva!" I yelled, not yet resorting to my witch magic. I had a feeling it was going to be a long night, and I did not want to tire myself so early.

I lunged between the trees, seeing Aveline hit the ground in a crouch near me. She motioned her hands in a sharp gesture, pushing outwards towards the nearest vampire, who was thrown back into a tree. He snarled at her, bloody mouth agape.

I didn't give him a chance to scrutinize her longer. I jumped, landing on his shoulders and twisting until I could feel his neck break.

My stomach churned as he fell, but I knew he wasn't dead yet.

Aveline appeared beside me, swiping her hand across her body and sending the vampire careening into the air with a gust of wind.

He hit a tree with a sickening crunch, thick branches impaling his body.

Two vampires remained, and one of them had Akiva down, though the lich certainly wasn't out.

He held his curved, sickle-like blade between him and the other vampire, trying to push the blade into the vampire's throat.

I grabbed the vampire's hair and shoved her downward, biting my lip to staunch my own distaste as her throat met the sharp edge.

She screamed, the smoky silver blade cutting deep into her throat and, after a moment, completely through it.

Blood spattered onto Akiva's face but he didn't seem to mind, and it didn't dim the sadistic glimmer in his eyes. Aveline sent the other vampire stumbling backwards with another burst of air as he rolled to his feet and tossed the vampire's head to the ground.

"George?" He asked, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

I turned on him, gaze challenging. "Helping," I said forcefully. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Before he could reply, the last vampire swept past us in a rush for freedom.

Akiva turned, pointing one finger at the man as he said something in a harsh, unrecognizable language.

Mist crept from the vampire to Akiva, tinged red, as the lich continued to speak.

The vampire *screamed* in terror and pain both, eyes rolling. He tried to take another step, but fell to the ground as Akiva closed his hand around the red mist, dissipating it.

"What was that? And why didn't you do it before?" I asked.

Akiva grabbed me suddenly, eyes flicking from my face to my shoulders and downward as if inspecting me for injuries. When he ran his hands up my arm to do the same, I slapped them away, causing him to roll his eyes.

"His soul. And I can't just walk around ripping out souls, now can I?" He looked us both over. "Cian won't be pleased. He left you with *her*-" He looked to Aveline pointedly, who studied her nails as if he didn't exist. "So you'd be safe."

"Well that didn't work for me," I shot back. "I'm going to help you. I brought Merric and Yuna here as well."

He studied me for a moment. "Cian is calling for us," he said with a long-suffering sigh. I didn't hear anything. "He's going to yell at me, I suppose, for not telling you to go home, silly witch."

Akiva started walking, and I fell into step with him. Aveline did as well.

“That almost sounds like you respect my decision,” I muttered dryly.

He snorted. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” The lich didn’t say anything else, and his silence didn’t invite discussion. He did, however, lead us unerringly to a clearing in the bayou where Cian and Merric stood waiting.

The vampire’s gaze found mine and his jaw clenched. “I thought I made it clear that we would handle this,” he pointed out.

“I thought *I* made it clear a week ago that I was going to help,” I retorted.

Indra crept into the clearing in his hellhound form, for all the world looking like an oversized and rather shy German shepherd. Yuna was close behind. The canine walked to me, butting his head against my hand until Cian sighed heavily.

“Don’t encourage her,” he all-but snapped. “You shouldn’t be here, George. How did you even find us?”

I opened my mouth, wanting to get ahead of Merric before he could speak and add to Cian’s insults.

He still beat me to it.

“She used the resources she’s gathered,” the kitsune said, coming to stand with me as Akiva moved away pointedly. “And don’t act so high and mighty. You’re using your hellhound and your lich the same way..”

“It’s different,” Cian replied. “I don’t use them.”

“Why? Because she and I aren’t sleeping together?”

Someone screamed and I whirled to see a vampire come shrieking towards us.

It was the *same* one I’d helped Akiva behead. I clenched my hand at my side, confused, and my nails bit into my palm.

“They’re getting faster,” The lich intoned as Indra shot forward to take care of the vampire.

“But we killed her,” I argued. “You and I-“

“The witches are keeping them from dying. They regenerate instead,” Akiva explained. “Nothing we kill is going to stay dead until their spell is stopped.”

“Do you not know where they are?” I asked, surprised.

Cian glanced my way. “We do,” he said finally. “But it doesn’t matter. The witches have trapped us in the bayou with Lucia’s people. *You*,

however, could leave. You're a witch too, so this magic won't work on you."

My eyes narrowed. "You mean for me to-"

"Go home," the vampire finished for me. "We'll take care of this."

"*I* brought Merric to you!" I protested. "*I* am the one who warned you about the witches beforehand. Perhaps if you had included me in your planning, you wouldn't be trapped in a damn swamp with alligators and regenerating *vampires!"*

Unsurprisingly, Cian didn't rise to my argument. "Go home," he said again. "I won't ask you again. I don't want you getting hurt, and you'll only slow us down."

His words stung and my face fell at the impact of them. Indra whined, ducking Cian's hand when the vampire reached out to comfort him.

"Whatever," I hissed, looking at Merric. "Will you stay and help them?"

"Oh, I don't know," the fox mused. "If he's going to talk to me like that, I'm not sure I would *want* to stay."

"I'm trying to protect her," Cian said, tone finally agitated.

"By treating her like a toddler? *Solid* plan, Cian." He held up a finger to his lips when the vampire went to speak again. "I'll stay because I told her that I would." His words came as a shock to me, but I fought to keep my face blank. "Though I don't know *why* she insists on me helping you when you're so ungrateful."

"I *am* grateful," Cian pressed. "But I'm also *realistic*-" He turned to me again, eyes bright, and my heart jumped into my throat.

I was *afraid* of what words he'd throw at me to make me leave.

When Cian stepped forward, I threw my hands up in surrender and backed away. "Okay," I said quickly, voice high with trepidation. Confusion registered on his face, like he couldn't understand my reaction. I'd used up all my social bravery tonight already. I couldn't deal with him going on about my inability to save myself.

Already I was questioning myself. *Doubting* myself. That wouldn't work for me if I intended to carry out my plan.

"I'll go," I said again. "Aveline and I will go home."

"And me," Yuna said, sheathing her sword. "I only came for George." I glanced at her, managing a small smile in her direction. If Cian wouldn't help me, I'd need her to cover my ass.

“We’ll get in touch after this is over,” Cian promised, trying to sound placating once more. “It’ll be fine; just let us take care of-“

“Okay,” I interrupted, hands raising slightly again before dropping to twist in my shirt.

This hadn’t gone at all as I’d hoped it would, and now I was left feeling like an idiot as Cian and Akiva scrutinized my expression. So much for jumping in and saving the day.

The vampire made a face and stepped forward again. “George-“ I had already stepped back, and Akiva grabbed his arm.

“Let it go,” he said quietly to the vampire. Akiva glanced at me with a frown. “See you later. Drive home safe.” He tugged on Cian’s arm and Indra barked in agreement.

“Bye,” I said flatly, studying the grass at my feet. Then, after a pause. “Be careful.”

I didn’t look for Cian’s expression, but I had a feeling he smirked as he replied. “Always.”

When I looked up again, the two of them were gone and only Indra’s shape was still visible faintly in the trees.

Merric, thankfully, had gone with them.

The three of us were silent for a moment, before Yuna let out a heavy sigh.

“We aren’t *really* going home, right?” She asked.

“Can you even get through the barrier?” My cousin inquired.

“Yes. Merric and I both have enough magic to cross it at will. I’d bet that the only one of them trapped in here is Cian. The others just won’t leave him,” Yuna explained. “So like I said, what are we doing?”

“We’re going to find the witches,” I said quietly.

“I figured you’d say that,” Aveline sighed. “Do you know where they are?”

Yuna had started walking and gestured for us to follow, so we did.

“They’re at the cemetery where I first met the *Troublesome Trio*.” I was more apt to use Merric’s stupid nickname for them when I was irritated and hurt.

“The one I found you in?” assumed Yuna.

“No. Sombre Oak.”

“And you think just the three of us can take on a coven?” Aveline asked disbelievingly as she hopped over a downed log.

“I don’t think it’s a whole coven,” I admitted, relaying the story of the woman from the woods who’d promised me that not all of them were on Colette’s side. “I doubt they’ll help us, but hopefully they won’t hinder us, either.”

“As you say,” Yuna agreed noncommittally. “If it were near the water, I would be more help. But I only have a little of my magic and my sword on land.”

“Can you like-control the tides or cause tidal waves?” I asked curiously. It wasn’t every day I was in the presence of a sea witch.

“I could drown them,” Yuna answered simply. “All of them. It’d be easier than you think.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never tried to drown anyone.”

“When this is over, I will teach you,” the Cecaelia offered.

“I don’t know, Yuna. Not sure that’s my idea of a good time.”

We were back at the fence now, and this time I cleared it with a jump, as Yuna had done. When I turned to help Aveline over, the air witch vaulted it as a breeze buffeted my front.

“It’ll take us about twenty minutes to get there,” Aveline cautioned, pulling open her car door.

Suddenly Yuna was there, hand out for the keys. “Let me drive,” she said.

“No?” Aveline pulled the keys away, but Yuna was faster. The shifter took them, then pushed Aveline gently away from the door.

“I won’t wreck, and we’ll get there *much* faster than if you drive,” the Cecaelia promised.

“How do you know?” I got in the back as Aveline slid into the passenger seat. “You’ve barely seen me drive.”

Yuna glanced at her as she turned the key in the ignition. “I’ve seen it once, and I’ve seen your house. It was enough,” she promised.

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CHAPTER 30

"I don't think it matters much where you park," Aveline admitted dryly as Yuna pulled up to a curb. "I'm calling it right now. She knows we're here."

"Well on the off chance she doesn't, I'd prefer we don't announce ourselves just yet," Yuna replied, getting out of the car and tossing Aveline her keys.

I got out as well, eyes fixed on the cemetery down the street.

Two witches stood at the gates, not looking in our direction.

"Talk about being obvious," I muttered. "They aren't even trying to hide that they're here. And isn't the cemetery closed this late?"

"I doubt anyone is going to tell them otherwise," my cousin commented, arms folded over her chest.

It occurred to me that as intimidating as the three of us were-kind of-we didn't look capable of taking out a coven.

"Do you think it's a sexist thing that they didn't let us stay?" Aveline was saying to Yuna as the cecaelia examined the length of her sword.

"I think men are worthless and this only serves as more proof," she shrugged. "Your *Troublesome Trio* are wholly arrogant. Your kitsune is…" she searched for the right word, teal eyes gazing steadily at the sky.

"Helpful?" I asked dryly.

"Unstable," Yuna said instead. "Either way, I'd rather have the two of you at my back than any of them."

Both Aveline and I traded confused looks. *Why*?

"What do you want to do, George?" It didn't escape me that Yuna and Aveline-and maybe Merric-were the only ones who trusted me to make any

kind of decision. The Troublesome Trio thought I'd wreck everything, apparently.

"We should split up," I said after a moment. "If we're all comfortable with that?" I looked at Aveline as I said it. Yuna was nodding like it was the most reasonable solution in the world.

"We'll most likely have to kill the witches," The cecaelia pointed out. "Unless we can scare them off."

My stomach clenched and I glanced away. Yuna didn't miss the motion, and her eyes held mine steadily. All I saw for a few seconds were the blurred faces of the witches I'd torn apart.

Will you be able to kill them? She seemed to be asking with her gaze alone.

"I know," I told her slowly. "But if they'll surrender and walk away, let them."

"Fine." Yuna looked to the cemetery, tone implying she didn't care if any of them left or not. "What do you want to do when we find their coven leader?"

"We shouldn't confront her," Aveline said quickly. "Not until we're all there. She'll kill us if we aren't careful."

"We need to look for where they have their magic set up," I added. "And break the spell that they've put on the bayou."

"Look for a map," Aveline suggested. "They didn't walk a circle around the whole bayou. That would be ridiculous. There will be a map of it, and something to signify the magic being worked there. We just need to destroy that."

"That's the priority," I added.

"I'll take the front gate." Yuna grinned as she said it. "I can make a lot of noise and draw some of them to the front of the cemetery. Both of you should find other ways to sneak in."

"I'll take the north side," Aveline agreed. She started walking down the alley we were parked near, and Yuna took that as a signal to stroll down the sidewalk.

I jogged across the street and down another side road, pausing to call back, "Good luck," before they were both out of earshot.

Yuna grinned. Aveline nodded.

Then they were gone, and I was on my own.

My quick paced walk turned into a jog, and I only slowed when I could see the wrought iron fence of the cemetery from the other side of the street.

Yelling had started, and I saw a few shapes rush towards the gates where Yuna had gone.

Quickly I called the power of the Chariot to me, forgoing the summoning and instead letting the card's power infuse my body.

When I held this card's Aspect, I had nearly the same kind of agility as I did as a fully shifted wolf, but with the bonus of no murderous tendencies. My steps were light on the ground, and it felt like I could run for miles. Easily I vaulted the wrought iron fence, not even skimming the top of it before landing in an easy crouch on the other side.

I wasn't as fast as my wolf, or Indra's hellhound shape, and definitely wouldn't be able to keep up with Cian, but I was quick on my feet all the same.

A witch stepped out from behind a tomb and I ducked, going round the other side and grabbing them by the mouth. I used my momentum to send them to the ground, one hand going to my thigh bag and bringing out a pinch of black dust from an open container there.

The dust was tossed onto the witch, and before she could speak I whispered a spell that reacted to Aveline's hypnotic concoction. A second later, she was unconscious. I wouldn't kill her if I didn't have to.

"What the *hell?"* Apparently she had a friend.

I whirled, hand going to the bag again, but the woman held her hands up in surrender. "No-I saw what you did at the compound."

"Then leave," I hissed through numb lips. "Now."

She hesitated. "I can't. My family will kill me-"

"*I'll* kill you if you stay," I promised, wondering if I could do just that.

That did it. The druidic witch exploded in a flock of crows that shot upward and out of the cemetery.

I started walking, letting my magical sense expand around me as I did. It was as if my magic blossomed from somewhere inside my rib cage, growing around me like a bubble. If the spell were close enough, I would be able to sense it. Unfortunately this opened me up to any witches looking for intruders as well.

Sure enough, the magical sight of another brushed my mind and I hissed in frustration as the man barreled around a corner hefting a flaming dagger like a torch.

“You killed my wife!” He snarled, causing a pang of regret to shoot through my body like a bullet.

“I didn’t-“ I stumbled backward, wanting to explain. “Your wife-“ Who *was* his wife, even? Faces blurred in front of my eyes. I couldn’t even remember those that I’d killed, past the blood and the thrill of it.

My moral dilemma gave the man the opening he needed. Words fell from his lips and he released the knife, though I was too slow to consider the repercussions of his actions.

I dodged, though it was too late and the blade sank into my thigh, causing me to cry out. Flames licked at my skin, burning me, though with the dagger no longer in his grip, the fire died off quickly, some of my panic going with it since I was no longer *on fire*.

Moving my own power like I would any other muscle in my body, I drew the Chariot’s form to me, banishing the aspect.

She appeared suddenly in front of me, kneeling and her arms crossed. It didn’t take a word-they weren’t soldiers to be ordered-only a push of my magic for her to lunge forward and bury her talons in the shocked male witch’s body.

I didn’t watch. I couldn’t, so instead I wrapped my hand around the hilt of the short blade sticking out of the front of my thigh.

It wasn’t silver, thankfully, but it still hurt like a bitch.

Swallowing back nausea, I pulled the knife free cleanly. My head spun, the knife clattered to the ground, and the form of the Chariot was there to brace me, her face neutral.

It wasn’t like she could actually worry about me.

But her strength was comforting and helpful all the same.

The cut healed under my scrutinous gaze. As the skin stitched back together I let out a breath, pressing my face against the Chariot’s feathered shoulder to wait out the quick healing process. My stomach rolled unpleasantly, as it had been doing while the pain ricocheted up and down my leg during the short tussle.

Unfortunately, another one of Colette’s witches took offense to my actions.

At a nudge from me, my card shot forward in a feathered flurry, taloned-feet braced against the woman’s chest as she went down.

This time, when the witch was dead, the form of the Chariot screamed, the sound like a bird’s screech.

Great. Now all of New Orleans knew I was here.

Testing my leg by putting gradual amounts of weight on it, I was glad to find it had healed. No muss, no fuss, and only the blood on my skin and black jeans to prove I'd ever been hurt.

Screams sounded from somewhere else in the cemetery and I looked up to see a mini twister forming in some far-off area. Bits of rock swirled around the whirlwind, and I hoped fervently that Aveline wasn't going to end up blowing around dead bodies.

Between my fights and Aveline's not so subtle natural disaster, I had very little hope that the entire cemetery didn't know who was here. Our advantage of surprise was gone; we needed to be done with this as soon as possible.

Then something occurred to me. I could use my magic to hunt down the spell so why couldn't I use the forms of my cards?

The best way to do so would be to summon the Moon, since-

I put my foot down on that thought. The Moon was hard to summon and harder to control. Now wasn't the time.

Instead I brought the form of the Devil to the graveyard, her card disintegrating into glittering particles once I'd summoned her. Then she was just suddenly *there*, in the shadowy entrance of one of the tombs, and lounged against the frame like she'd been there this whole time.

The Devil was completely different from the Chariot. I didn't summon her Form much, but only because I found the weapon her Aspect gifted me with to be very useful.

The form of the Devil was that of a sallow, grey skinned woman. If I hadn't known she was my card, I would've thought her a zombie. Her face was eternally shrouded in shadow, her eyes glowing like embers in the pits of her sockets. I wasn't sure if she actually had eyes, or just those weird, glowing….whatever they were.

She wore a torn and knotted dress that tied at her waist, and her whip hung from one hand, curled in black-stained fingers. Her hair was long and lank, and if I were being generous I would've called it brown. But perhaps that was just the dirt.

Two horns curled upward from her hair, shining like oil slicks in the moonlight.

If I was right, I could use The Devil and The Chariot to widen my search zone.

With a push of my magic, I sent the Chariot searching to my right, her steps careful and her hands brushing over the walls of tombs and gates alike.

When I did the same for the devil, she shot forward in a rush of black, solid mist that enveloped me, choking me for a moment before she was past me and searching as well.

While they weren't alive, nor had any actual self, there was still *something* to these cards that made them more than simple puppets. They were directed by my magic, yes, but if I directed them to kill someone, they would both go about it in very different ways.

As they searched, I did too. For a moment it was hard not to marvel at how far my magical senses now reached. Why had I not thought to do this sooner?

What else could I learn to do with my cards?

My mother had trained me, but there was only so much she could teach. We didn't know any living summoners. Much of what I could do I had picked up from journals left by my great-great grandmother and my own ideas.

I'd been missing out.

It was lucky that Yuna and Aveline had drawn most of the witches to another part of the cemetery. I was able to search undisturbed, and I didn't see anyone else as my steps took me further and further towards the trees that stood resolutely behind the back fence.

Surely they were *here*, right? Not in the woods beyond? The cemetery would be the safest place for him if Cian did end up killing Lucia and coming for revenge.

When, I told myself. Not *if.*

Something brushed against my magical sight and it took me a second to figure out who had found it.

The Devil.

She stood still as I made my way towards her, the Chariot appearing in a rush of wings behind me.

Now I could feel the steady pulse of magic. The air was thick with power around me and tingled the bare skin of my arms. I felt itchy all over, but scratching did nothing to alleviate the annoyance. I stopped walking.

My summons and I stood in front of a tomb that, for all intents and purposes, seemed sealed.

I directed the Chariot forward, and in five seconds flat the form had managed to get the door open, and the stone thudded heavily to the ground when she did, cracking and sounding like thunder in the cemetery.

Inside the tomb was a small, open room.

I hesitated, not wanting to go into the dim, nearly black space. Who *would?* This went against all of things horror movies had ever taught me.

The outside of it was impressive, and looked to be one of the older structures here. Angels were carved into the sides of the structure, and columns reached upward to hold up a peaked roof.

Light filtered in, though it wasn't bright enough to make the tomb any less foreboding.

I stepped in anyway, and realized that I should've questioned why it was empty and why I'd gone *first*.

Something rushed me, though it was impossible to tell what.

Screeching in fear, I hastily and clumsily directed the Devil to my side, where she lashed out with a whip to catch the-person?

At my urging she dragged the thing into the moonlight, and what I saw made my stomach flip.

I had been attacked by a *corpse*.

Even now the half-decayed thing fought to get free of my card, and quickly I had her behead the thing. She did so, but the creature still writhed.

So she took off its arms, then its legs.

And still the pieces tried to come for me.

"Fuck," I said, voice echoing off the stone. A necromancer had put these here to guard the spell, I reasoned. Undying, mindless corpses that would attack anyone that thought to enter without permission.

I did *not* want to step any further into the tomb.

But across the small space sat an altar, and I would be damned if there wasn't some kind of map on it.

"*Fuck*," I stated again. I needed to do this fast.

Pushing my will into the forms of my cards, I sent the Devil forward, the Chariot spinning and making as much movement as she could behind me.

The decoys worked; spelled corpses lunged from the walls at both of them, groans echoing throughout the tomb.

Terrified, I dashed forward, stopping at the edge of the altar to look down at the spell as my heart thudded in my chest and my hands shook.

My arcana forms fought behind me, but I only gave them enough of my focus to keep them going.

Yet *again* the thought of summoning The Moon entered my mind.

Yet again, I pushed it away.

With everything happening around me, it was hard to pull my thoughts together to take in what I was seeing and figure it out.

The map. A bowl full of burning herbs. Four crystals in the cardinal directions.

I reached out, only to recoil with a hiss when the crystals flared and magic shocked my fingers.

“Okay, I knew it wouldn’t be that easy,” I grumbled, eyes tracing the painted circle that enclosed the Lafourche Bayou outside of the city.

My hand went to my bag and I pulled out some of the black powder from before, throwing that at the circle to see if it would nullify the magic there.

The little barrier flared and incinerated the dust.

I’d need a lot more magic to end this spell. Not that it surprised me really.

Glancing behind me for the first time, I saw that my arcana fought the zombies dauntlessly. They’d ripped apart bodies, but pieces still came after them.

A detached arm hung from the Chariot’s throat, while the Devil had a man’s severed torso gripping her around the waist.

With a yank, I pulled both Forms to me, then turned and reached out towards the map.

They did the same, in their own ways. The Chariot’s clawed, feathered hand went out quick as a viper, finding the sparking barrier and pushing.

The Devil’s whip snaked forward and did the same.

Calling up all the magic I muster, I tried very hard to ignore the corpses grabbing at my ankles and reached for the crystal nearest me.

I didn’t try to move it. I instead flooded it with magic, biting my lip as shocks fought to pry my fingers off of the jagged mineral.

But I didn’t let up. It was bearable with my arcana forms taking the brunt of the magic, and with another burst of magic sent into the crystal, I felt something *pop.*

Everything was quiet for half a second, before all four crystals shattered explosively.

I closed my eyes, glad for my glasses, and shielded my face with my hands. I was too late to stop all the shards of magicked crystal, and felt the hard edges bite into my skin.

Finally, when I lowered my hands and blinked away the blood that trickled from a particularly deep cut in my eyebrow, I found that the burning herbs had disintegrated, the crystals were gone, and the map itself had burned.

Unfortunately, the rain of shattered magic had also caused my arcana forms to disappear, which left me alone in the dark, with the blessedly unmoving corpses on the ground behind me.

I'd done it. I'd broken the spell on the bayou so that Cian and the others were no longer trapped and, hopefully, the vampires could no longer regenerate.

Now I wanted to get out of here, before Cian could come tell me how I'd somehow fucked this up too.

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CHAPTER 31

My plans derailed the moment I stepped out of the tomb. The sounds of fighting were still evident in other places, so I figured Yuna and Aveline were still at it. I worried for them, even though I could feel the tug of Aveline's magic at my core and knew she was alive. I didn't regret splitting up from them, but I needed to know how they were doing.

The night around me was still, but I froze the moment I stepped back into the moonlight, brow furrowed.

Someone was calling me.

Not physically. No, this was magic curling around my hands, leading me deeper into the cemetery.

It wasn't hypnotizing or forceful. If I wanted to ignore it, I could. I should, even. I should go back to my allies and get the hell out of here.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

You're the one she kidnapped and put into a messy little dream loop, right? Have we forgotten that already?

Merric's words echoed forcefully in my ears and I was half-sure that if I looked around, he'd be here taunting me.

"We haven't forgotten that," I whispered, tail curling at my back and ears flattening.

I followed the beckoning, magical whisper.

It led me on a straight path, past tombs and crypts and too many names to count.

I let it.

No one stopped me. I didn’t see or sense anyone else as I walked, and I was sure it was deliberate.

Finally, the magic stopped. I blinked in the near darkness, my eyes traveling around the open area in front of me.

Torches flickered to life, casting blue, eerie light on the stone and wrought iron of the tombs and fences around us. The air was crisp and clear, not thick with magic like the tomb had been. This far in, I could hear nothing over the sound of my own heart, even with the enhanced senses of my half shifted form.

Colette Villere, leader of the New Orleans Coven, stood less than twenty feet from me.

Her head was bowed and she faced away from me, hands holding herself up on an altar that dripped something dark and thick to the stone below.

The way she sagged, the coven leader looked tired.

“All I’ve ever wanted is prosperity for my witches,” the woman murmured, voice barely above a whisper. “A *place* for us in this city. Over the years I’ve protected us from shifters, vampires, and everything else.” She laughed humorlessly. “Never did I think a *witch* would cause me this much trouble.”

“You brought this on yourself,” I said tiredly. “When you kidnapped Aveline. When you tried to take away my freedom.”

She shook her head. “I wanted to protect you. Don’t you get that? You’re a *Levasseur summoner*. The first in how many generations? Do you understand how few summoners exist in this world? How many fewer still have cards of the Arcana?” Her shoulder slumped. “You could’ve joined us. You could’ve made us so powerful.”

“That was my choice to make. I had no intention of joining you, but neither did I want to harm any of you.*You* forced me into this by taking away my choices.” I spoke with a defiance I felt, and confidence I did not.

She let out a long suffering, exhausted sigh. “Perhaps I have become soft in my old age,” the woman went on. “Time was, I would’ve snuffed out your life the moment you became a threat to me. I gave you the opportunity to be someone important. To be loved. But you could only spit in my face.”

Before I could reply she turned on me, and I was able to catch sight of her rune-painted face and bloodstained hands a second before her fingers were reaching towards me, knuckles bent.

I gasped, clawing at my neck as an invisible hand closed over it. What was it with Colette's witches and going straight for the throat?

She stepped forward, lifting her hand, and my feet left the ground. I was thrown back into one of the mausoleums, the air *whooshing* from my lungs as I still fought to breathe.

"Was it worth it?" She asked, her eyes sharp. The blue torchlight painted her in an otherworldly glow, the unsteady light making the runes seem to shimmer on her face.

Never give a ritualist a chance to prepare, Aveline had told me once. *Caught off guard, they're no better than a hedge witch. If you give them enough time, they'll figure out how to move heaven and earth to take you down. Don't let them.*

I'd let her. I'd given her ample time and hadn't tried to surprise her. I'd walked here when she called and *let her* have the advantage.

Now I was going to pay for it with my life.

My two cards couldn't be called back so soon, and I couldn't force myself to shift with her magic gripping me, cutting me off from my wolf.

And she knew it.

"Was it worth it?" The old woman's words were laced with hatred and scorn. "To save the *monsters* you've only met? They aren't even your kind. They were *always* going to leave you to die." She laughed, then, and the sound was high pitched and wild. "They aren't here to *save* you, but you'll *die* for them."

I gasped around her magic, fighting to speak. "They-" I choked on my own words. *"They don't need to save me!"*

Willing my magic to answer me, I called out in desperation for the one card I hadn't summoned in well over a year. I couldn't call The Devil and The Chariot again so soon; my magic with them was spent for the time being.

I didn't know if the Moon had an Aspect. The Form itself was too much for me; how did I know the Aspect would be any better?

Now I called the Form of the Moon to me, letting magic spill from the card in my hands as glowing runes encircled both my palms. It was only one card, but it took everything I had in me to summon it.

A wolf howled close by. Then another. Instead of pushing my magic into the Moon, the arcana Form-or *Forms*-seemed to pull it out of me like a rope. They barely needed a magical command, unlike my other two cards.

A white, spectral wolf sprang from the roof of the tomb, transparent and with a long, flag-like tail that streamed in an invisible wind.

Colette's face fell in surprise and her magic on me loosened, though she didn't let go. I gasped in relief anyway, hands held protectively over my throat as if I could stop her from using that power again.

Then another wolf leapt on her from behind and she whirled to throw it off, incinerating it with her magic.

It didn't matter. Another formed in its place and her grip on me vanished, allowing me to fall to the ground on my knees.

I stood, two more wolves creeping around the sides of the mausoleum with jewel bright eyes and half-there forms.

It was as if the wolves brought my own animal fury to the surface. I walked towards the coven leader, elongated canines bared as I drew back my lips in a silent snarl.

"I won't need to die for any of them," I promised her quietly, feeling cold and not at all forgiving. "I was going to kill you once. I stood outside your home and only *Cian* was there to save you. Did you know that?"

Surprise flitted across her gaze. "Don't be arrogant." She pointed at another of the wolves, causing it to explode in a shower of magic. "You don't have near the power needed to keep them here long enough to kill *me*."

Magic surged in the space between us; the torches flared. She sent cobalt power streaking in my direction and I caught it in my hand, channeling the magic back towards her, though it seared the skin of my palm and filled my nose with the scent of burning flesh.

I ignored it, striding forward as I felt the wound heal.

Another wolf crept out of the shadows, giving me a total of three.

"I can keep doing this!" The witch laughed, incinerating that one too. "You'll be out of magic soon, and you'll be at my mercy."

She sent her magical grip towards me again. This time I felt it and braced myself for the blow, though fear churned in my gut.

Almost on its own, one of the wolves leapt forward, fangs digging into her outstretched arm and causing the woman to shriek in surprise and pain.

Her magic caught me as well, sending me staggering instead of strangling me.

She should've been right, but the wolves weren't draining me like I thought. Sure, every time one of them regenerated it took a bit more from

me, but it was so *little* that I could do this all night.

Could I do more?

Marveling at my own magic and studying the wolf at my side, I barely heard Colette's triumphant shout, though I felt her magic swell like the tides as she prepared to strike.

"George!" Cian was there, along with Indra in his hellhound shape.

"No," I said quietly, seeing him look to Colette and take a step forward.

This wasn't his fight.

He didn't need to save me-didn't he see that? Didn't he see just what I could do without him?

But I couldn't stop him, and it was in slow motion that I saw him step forward again, though I lifted my hand as if I could stop him.

Cian stopped, a wolf appearing in front of him and blocking his path.

His eyes widened in shock and he looked to where I held my hand out to him. I was just as surprised.

"Let me pass," he ordered.

"No," I said again. Akiva was there as well, and at that thought alone, another wolf appeared to block him from going forward.

The wolves radiated their approval, but that was impossible.

They were not *alive*.

"I can do this," I whispered to both of them, the wolves pacing in front of them.

WITH JUST BARELY A THOUGHT-JUST A LITTLE *PUSH* OF MY MAGIC-I summoned The Moon again.

And again

And again.

Why was it suddenly so easy?

Colette sneered, and released her magic.

I gasped, frightened for my life as I felt the rushing, seeking force that spelled my death surging forward to meet me. *I couldn't do this.* I'd been wrong-the wolves were barely mine to control and *I had been wrong.*

Then, suddenly, her magic vanished as if it had hit an invisible barrier.

But my wards were nowhere near that strong.

Low growls met my ears and when I opened my eyes, the area around me was filled with wolves. There were at least ten of them, and I could feel

my *magic* inside each and every one of them.

They all snapped and grinned, waiting for my command.

“What have you done?” The coven leader asked, her eyes going from one wolf to the next.

“What have I…” I looked down at my hands, seeing the lines and runes marching up both my arms.

They tingled, the white, glowing lines seeming to writhe and shimmer.

But the wolves were hungry, and they were *impatient*. Almost not waiting for my command, I felt rather than saw the Arcana Forms lunge for the old, worn out coven leader.

Perhaps at her full strength she could’ve beaten me, but the spell on the bayou had weakened her.

She killed the first two wolves easily, disintegrating them with her magic only for them to reform at her throat.

The third knocked her to the ground and she screamed, half obscured as the furred, transparent shapes pressed her to the stone eagerly. Ravenously.

I *felt* it.

I *felt* when the wolf tore into her throat.

I *felt* when another grabbed her by the neck and shook her like a ragdoll.

But I didn’t stop them. I *couldn’t* stop them.

Akiva was staring at me, and I wanted to run and hide from his shocked look.

Colette stopped screaming, but my wolves didn’t abate. They worried at her body, tearing at her corpse with sharp fangs and too-much strength.

“Call them off,” Cian said calmly.

“I can’t,” I whispered, eyes wide. I *wanted* to. I wanted them to disappear because they weren’t listening and I was afraid.

I hadn’t asked them to do this, had I?

“George, call them off. She’s dead,” Cian said again.

“I *can’t!*” I gasped again, my heart pounding in my ears. They drew my attention. My focus. My magic. I couldn’t look away from them, nor could I stop feeling everything they did like *I* was the one doing it. Like *I* was the one-

A slim-fingered hand curled in my shirt, *yanked* me around hard, and slapped me.

It brought me out of my all-consuming focus on the wolves and Colette, and my wide eyes found Yuna’s scowl very suddenly. I hadn’t even noticed

her appearance. Had she seen everything?

It was as if a switch inside of me clicked off, and I *felt* the wolves vanish into nothing.

My face stung, but I was incredibly grateful to Yuna for doing what she had.

“I didn’t mean to!” I gasped, gripping her shirt with shaking hands. “The wolves-I didn’t mean to-“

“Stop,” Yuna said calmly, though her voice was like steel. “She was going to kill you if you didn’t beat her to it, George.” She turned, backing me into one of the tombs and pressing my back to the stone with her presence and her insistent grip. “And…” She leaned forward, whispering in my ear. “You came here and made friends with the monsters. Do you really think you aren’t one too?”

My heart pounded in my chest. Me? A monster?

I didn’t see any of my friends as that, and I certainly had never considered myself to fit that term.

Dust rained down on my shoulder and both of us looked up into Merric’s irritated frown.

“This is cute,” he said sweetly, though his voice held an edge and he hadn’t bothered with his normal facade. Blood was streaked over his nose, giving him a savage appearance “Really heartwarming, but I’d like to *burn the witch* and leave.”

“Burn the witch?” I repeated slowly, my brain barely catching up with the rest of me.

Aveline strode past, a lit torch in her hand and Indra on her other side. “You know why,” she said simply, tossing the torch onto Colette’s body.

Of course I did. Powerful witches who died violent deaths were burned so they couldn’t come back as zombies or something worse.

Curses and beasts had been made from bits of witch before. I didn’t need *any* piece of Colette coming after me in the future.

I stood there, frozen, and watched the coven leader’s body burn.

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CHAPTER 32

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" I asked for the sixth time, sitting back in the driver's seat and not bothering to get out. "Because it feels like I'm leaving you out-"

"*You aren't,*" Aveline interrupted, her voice echoing a bit from my phone. "*Besides. I'm working. And you need to get your shit sorted out."*

I very carefully paused, fiddling with my tank top as if she could see me. "I don't have anything to sort out," I said finally, happy I was alone in my car.

"*Yes you do. So take care of it."*

"No, Aveline. I really don't-"

"*See you when you get home. And don't rush on my account*." She hung up suddenly, like I hadn't been arguing with her.

Throwing my head back, I closed my eyes with a long-suffering sigh.

I wasn't dumb. I knew what she *meant*.

I hadn't spoken to Cian or Akiva since holding them with my newfound power the night before. It had been pretty obvious that Cian, at the very least, had not enjoyed the grip of my magic.

But I hadn't *meant* to. I'd just wanted him to stop so that I could take care of my own problems.

I'd expected him to be angry, or to chastise me for going to the cemetery instead of going home. So after Aveline and Indra had burned Colette, I'd left without saying much, citing exhaustion and waving goodbye.

There had been no movie-perfect moment. No coming together in a badass way to celebrate our victory.

And certainly no apology from Cian.

This morning, however, I'd woken up to having been added to a group chat and Indra had invited everyone-Yuna and Merric included-to dinner at our usual spot.

So here I was, internally arguing with myself in my car over whether or not I should even get out.

I didn't need a repeat of last night's conversations and Cian's condescension. Was he just going to *use* this dinner as an opportunity to berate me?

The passenger door clicked and I opened my eyes in confusion.

The object of my racing thoughts, vampire extraordinaire himself, sat in my passenger seat looking gorgeous and blameless. Muggy air flooded the SUV until he closed the door, and I considered turning the AC back on.

I opened my mouth to say something, but he got there before me.

"I don't want you sitting in your car all night," he said slowly, red eyes holding mine. Tonight he wore his leather jacket and his blonde hair was perfectly tousled. I was willing to bet he took longer to get ready than I did.

I looked away from him, gaze trained on a small dog bouncing at its owner's heels.

"Are you going to tell me I should've stayed home last night?" I asked finally. "And are you mad about the telekinesis thing?" I tried to ask the question in a cool, collected tone, but failed. Instead my voice came out too high and too unsure, while my heart pounded its misgivings in my throat. Why did I care so much what he thought of me? And when had I *started* to care this much for his opinion?

Cian sighed, rubbing his thumb over a small tear in his jeans. "No," he said finally.

"To which one?"

A small, hesitant smile found his lips. "Both. Is that why you're sitting out here? Because you think I'm mad at you?"

"Yes," I admitted stiffly. "And because I don't want to find out how pissed Akiva is."

"For what?" Cian laughed. "Not letting him jump Colette? He isn't mad at you. *I'm* not mad at you." Cian reached out, hand resting on mine that was on the console between us. His fingers curled over mine, tapping at my knuckles. "I was wrong," he said at last, prompting me to whirl on him in surprise and disbelief.

“Say it again,” I requested. “Otherwise I’ll think I’m hallucinating.”

“I was wrong.” His hesitant smile grew. “And I treated you like a child, when I shouldn’t have. Merric was right.”

“Don’t say *that* part so loud,” I cautioned. “The devil has keen ears, you know.”

“Gods, don’t I know it,” the vampire muttered. “I feel badly for what I said. And for making you think I was upset with you. I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“You know who else said that to me?” I met his gaze, eyes narrowed.

“Who?”

“Colette. When she kidnapped me, put a hex on me, and put me into this really disgusting dream loop where I saw all of you die. Well. Not you. In my dream loop, you were already dead,” I explained. “You can’t take away my choices like that, Cian.” My fingers tugged at the hem of my tank top, stretching the fabric.

The vampire’s hand moved, covering mine, and gently extricated my shirt from my grip.

“I’m sorry.” He pulled my hand into his. “Anything I can do to make it up to you?”

I considered his question, then grinned nervously. There were definitely a couple of things only he or Indra could help me with. Getting the upper hand with Akiva was one of them. “Help me get the jump on Akiva next time I come over.”

Cian snorted. “I *might* consider distracting him for all of ten seconds to give you a chance, but that’s it.” He opened his door, then looked at me pointedly until I did the same with mine.

The sun had only recently set, and the Quarter was *packed* with people. We walked down the street, and I was both charmed and unsurprised to see Merric aggressively smack Yuna’s shoulder and point her in our direction.

She rolled her eyes and pushed him away, making the kitsune squawk indignantly and stagger.

It was obviously an act, but that didn’t bother me tonight.

Indra walked towards us, and while I expected him to go to Cian, he didn’t. Instead the hellhound threw his arms around my shoulders and embraced me eagerly. My breath caught in my chest. He’d come to *me?*

“You left so fast last night that I couldn’t thank you,” the hellhound admonished gently. He smiled warmly, pulling a smile from my own lips

that I couldn't hold back. I felt myself blush, though willed my body to not make this a big deal.

"My bad," I said, wrapping my arms around him. "And you *never* have to thank me. Only Akiva does." I met the lich's momentarily shocked glance over Indra's shoulder.

His eyes narrowed and he snorted. "*Thank you*, O great George, for your heroic actions. You have saved us all, and the kingdom of New Orleans will be at peace for at least the next five days. Is that sufficient?"

"Nope. Try again on your knees."

He shook his head, rolling his eyes mockingly. "That's *so* inappropriate. What will the public think?"

Merric craned his head around to look at us from behind Yuna. "C'mon *c'mon*," the facade-wearing fox called. "I'm hungry and Cian's buying."

"He is?" I walked with Indra through the doors and out to the back patio.

Our tables by the decorative fence had been shoved together, as we'd had them before. It made me smile.

Predictably, everyone took their same seats, and Akiva *again* hooked his leg around mine as we sat, while Yuna rested her arm against mine with a sideways glance from her teal eyes.

I didn't mind. I liked sitting between the two of them, with Cian fielding insults and protests from Merric as they sat down.

"Is this a date?" I asked curiously.

"Do you want it to be?" Indra inquired, resting his menu on the table and meeting my gaze.

My grin widened. "Yeah, I do actually."

I LEANED AGAINST THE RAILING BY THE RIVER, HEAD TIPPED BACK TO STARE at the stars while tourists and performers yelled and called out their approval. With my back to the river, I could feel the cool breeze against my shirt. Dinner had gone much more smoothly than I'd expected. Even Merric had been on his best behavior. Or at the very least, his insults seemed less abrasive than usual.

"There you are."

I didn't look down, but I did smile as Yuna leaned on the fence beside me, not looking at the sky.

“I’m sorry I slapped you yesterday,” she said. “I didn’t know how else to get you to release your magic.”

“Don’t apologize,” I murmured, not really wanting to think about the wolves of the Moon tonight. That was a problem for another day.

Admittedly, I seemed to be racking up quite a few of those, and I was worried that *another day* was going to end up coming a lot sooner than I wanted it to.

“I’d like to get together again soon,” the cecaelia went on, looking to where Merric was laughing at something Indra said. Or perhaps laughing at Indra himself. “Without the Troublesome Trio and your fox.” It did not escape me that she had picked up Merric’s nickname for them.

“I want to do that too,” I agreed.

She crossed her legs at the ankle, and sighed. “I hope you don’t regret this.”

“Regret what?” I looked at her for the first time and saw her staring at me intensely. It made my stomach clench slightly and my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“Coming to New Orleans. Helping them. Meeting me. *Merric*. Have you stopped to think about how much you don’t know about us? Will you really throw your lot in with a nine tailed fox, a centuries old vampire, a *lich*, a lost dog, and a *sea witch*?”

“I don’t see the issue with it,” I shrugged, willing my face to remain blank. Our differences had tickled at my brain far into the night, but she didn’t need to know that.

“It doesn’t bother us, you know.”

“Me?”

“*Killing*. None of them-not even Indra-bats an eye at it.” Her gaze was steady and she reached out to encircle my wrist with her long fingers. “What will you be like, when you don’t flinch at taking a life either?”

When, she’d said. Not *if*.

The cecaelia pulled me to her, pressing our mouths together insistently like it didn’t bother her one way or another how I might feel about the statement.

Her teeth were sharp and pricked at my lip, but she pulled away after only a few moments. “See you later,” she told me, pushing off the fence and walking into the darkness of the river walk.

I watched her go, pondering her words carefully. She couldn't be right, I was sure. I liked all of my new companions for who they were, but I was not like *them.* I could never be.

Something brushed my calf and I huffed, not needing to turn. "How long have you been listening?"

Merric's voice was full of amusement. "Long enough to hear the cecaelia give you that little moral dilemma."

Now I did turn, unsurprised to see him without his fake orange fur.

I *was* surprised, however, to see that he wasn't just showing off his white tails and ears like badges of pride. He'd gone the whole nine yards. Dark circles made his yellow eyes seem too bright in his pale face and his tousled hair, too, was darker.

"Aren't you worried someone will see?" I asked. "Goddess forbid someone catch on-"

"No one can see," Merric dismissed. "And you only see because I *let* you." His tails flicked arrogantly.

Should I ask him just why he was letting me see? Maybe not.

"What do you want?" I asked finally. "I thought you'd just disappear when you wanted to leave." Curiously I looked back towards the diner, peering through the glass window to see that Cian was leaning close to the register and the cashier was speaking rapidly to him and quite possibly crying. Had Merric done something to her?

"It's easy to distract them," Merric chuckled. "What with Cian so set on making you all believe what a good person he is." Was that him admitting to pushing the waitress to tears?

"A lot better person than you," I snorted.

His smile turned curious. "*Is* he?"

"Well he hasn't pressed me for any life debts so far, so yeah. I'm going with he is."

"Right. He hasn't pressed you for any *life debts*. But he's tasted your blood, and somehow convinced a Levasseur summoner with three Arcana to almost die for him, even though you've only known him a short while. But *I'm* the bad guy here."

I turned to look at him fully, arms crossed. I didn't know what to say, and his full attention on me was making me nervous.

"What do you want?" I repeated.

“A lot of things,” the kitsune said, dodging the question. “Don’t we all?”

My eyes narrowed and his grin turned dark.

“Oh *I* see. You meant what do I want from *you*. I’m so sorry for misunderstanding.” He studied me. “I don’t want anything from you right now. Nor tomorrow. Nor the day after that, and not next week either.”

That surprised me. I’d thought he’d make my life miserable as soon as he could.

“You’re an *idiot*, George,” he went on conversationally, as if he couldn’t believe my actions. I blinked, taken aback, but he continued. “To give me *whatever* I want? What if I demanded your cards? What if I demanded *you*?” His eyes blazed mockingly.

“Will you?” I asked quietly, my mind scrambling for solutions to all of these possible dire situations.

“No. But I’m very tempted to ask you for something you’ll hate, if only to teach you a lesson in preternatural dealings.” He shook his head almost ruefully.

Stupidly, I pressed forward. “Then why don’t you?”

“Because *I’m* an idiot,” he sneered. “And because of what you said before.”

I thought back to anything I’d said when he was around, but nothing stood out.

My confusion must’ve been obvious, because he snorted and explained. “When you were with Marin, you told her she was prejudiced, that not all foxes are bad. Even though she told you that she’d rather keep her own hypocrisy than face the possibility of being fooled by a fox.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “And by Inari’s *tails* you were so stupid, even then. You were *already being tricked by a fox* and yet you told her that. She knew about me. Can you imagine how dumb she thinks you are?”

I had a feeling that, while Marin probably found me to be the stupidest witch alive by now, it wasn’t solely because of my dealings with Merric. But I didn’t say that. I didn’t question the fact that he knew what had been said. He seemed to always be lurking around me in mirrors or dreams.

“And because of your stupid scrying.” He was shaking his head like it was the dumbest thing he could imagine.

“Well sorry that it’s not my specialty-“

“Not *that*,” Merric interrupted, glaring at a person who stared a bit too long at us and sending the man almost running in the opposite direction. “You were projecting these ridiculous fox memories into your magic.”

“You saw that?” I asked uncertainly. “But I wasn’t-“

“Trying to let me see? I know.” He blinked up at me. “If I was *nicer* like some of the others-or maybe *younger* and still soft-I’d forgive these debts of yours.”

My heart jumped in my chest. That would be one less thing to worry about.

His grin turned mocking again and his pointed canines flashed. “But don’t get excited. I’m not going to do that.”

Familiar voices made both of us look towards the diner. Cian’s eyes were fixed on us and the three men were waiting for the light to change so they could cross the street to join us.

“Guess my time’s up,” Merric laughed curtly. “See you soon, Georgette.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped. “Only my mom-“

But he was gone.

With a sigh, I turned towards the street, watching the three men stride over the crosswalk. I knew what they’d say. I knew they’d make some comment or twenty on how Merric was dangerous. On how I’d fucked up.

In my brain I compiled at least four arguments, varying from almost-hostile to naive. All of them included insulting Akiva. Most of them included winning Indra over to my side with my winning personality.

Akiva was quickest across, and continued to stride towards me.

A thrill went down my spine. “Akiva-“ I began, but he didn’t let me finish.

Instead, the lich grabbed my waist and crushed our mouths together without preamble. I gasped in surprise, giving him the opportunity to deepen the kiss and press his thigh between mine.

“I’m taking you home with me, silly witch,” he growled into my mouth. “Unless you have somewhere *better* to be?” He pulled back, eyes glittering.

“I’ll clear my schedule,” I breathed, a small smile curving my lips. “But I *do* have to move my car tonight.”

“I’ll go with you,” Indra offered. “I can give you directions and show you where to park.”

I dipped my head in agreement and Akiva pulled back. “You have fifteen minutes,” he told me, *almost* threateningly.

“But what if I need sixteen?” I teased, and his lips quirked into a smirk.

“Find out,” he invited, then had started walking in the direction of Cian’s car.

Cian’s eyes glittered with mirth. “See you in a bit,” he agreed.

“Cian!” I called, voice just loud enough for him to hear. The vampire turned, one brow raised. “When I give you the signal, I want that ten seconds of distraction,” I told him.

His look was surprised, then wickedly amused. “Oh yeah? What’s the signal, then?”

“I’ll clear my throat at you.”

“That seems a bit too blatant for him to miss, don’t you think?”

“No? You’ll be distracting him, so it’ll be fine.”

Cian laughed. “If you say so.” He trailed after Akiva, catching up quickly.

“What are you trying to do? Do I *want* to know what you’re trying to do?” Indra inquired as we turned towards my SUV.

“It’ll be a surprise,” I told him soberly.

He sighed. “Whatever it is, I have a feeling you’re going to be the one surprised, *not* Akiva.”

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CHAPTER 33

Indra pushed the door open for me and I walked in, kicking off my shoes and socks by the door as I had the last time.

Akiva was prowling about the living room, barefoot as well, and looked up at me with a grin and mouth open to speak.

I looked at Cian and without hesitation, delicately cleared my throat.

The vampire looked surprised for all of two seconds before he grabbed Akiva's shoulder and pulled the lich around with a growl.

Akiva's face fell in shock and he was, for the moment, completely sidetracked.

I *had* a plan. It went rather simply, and elegantly. I would push Akiva to the ground, say something witty, and go from there.

It was a *good* plan.

When he was facing away from me, I grinned and shifted to bring my ears and tail out so I could take advantage of some of my wolf's strength.

Indra watched, orange eyes bright with interest, but didn't speak.

Cian had grabbed Akiva's jaw, grip firm, and kissed him. It was a very good distraction, and I found myself wanting to watch the show rather than proceed with my actions.

But I *really* wanted the lich on his knees for me.

Stepping forward, I reached out and tangled my fingers in Akiva's hair, jerking his head back and away from Cian, who let him go with a grin. My other hand went to the man's hip to keep him pressed against me as I growled softly against his jaw.

"Oh, I *see*," the lich murmured, eyes closed and body pliant.

Or rather, he was until I started guiding him downward. Then his knees locked and he very pointedly *did not* go down. "*I see*," he said again, jovially. "Are you trying to get me on my knees for you, George?"

Okay, so maybe my swift and elegant plan had failed.

"Don't you want to?" I breathed against his skin, feeling his smirk curl against my lips. "For me?"

"Oh well…if you ask me so sweetly," he went pliant again, making the motions of falling to his knees.

Until suddenly he wasn't doing that anymore. He stood, head resting back on my shoulder and he opened his eyes to gaze up at me. "You took fifteen minutes and seventeen seconds to get here," he informed me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What?"

"And I believe I told you that you had *fifteen*. Anything you'd like to say about that?"

"Umm." No? Was there something I was forgetting?

"Nothing at all?"

I blinked at him again, ears falling atop my head slightly. I looked at Indra, who very pointedly looked at the ceiling.

"No?" I said nervously.

"Well I will certainly take that-and this little stunt-into consideration." Suddenly he had slipped my grip to stand straight again, and had shoved me back against the wall with his thumb and forefinger gripping my jaw, the rest of his fingers splayed against my throat.

Cian prowled around us until he could grab the surprised Indra and pull him into a kiss. The hellhound yelped in pleased astonishment, melting into the vampire's grip and I swore I saw his tail wag.

"Do you want that?" Akiva asked, not looking behind him. "For me to pull you into a sweet kiss and spoil you like Cian does?"

My mouth twitched into a small smile, but at his bemused expression I licked my lips and fought to force it away, convinced it might not help the situation at hand. "Yeah. You can absolutely spoil me like that."

"*Oh*-so you want something so soon after those two little transgressions of yours?" He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "You're so *selfish*, aren't you?"

My mouth fell open. "No-I'm not selfish-"

He was grinning, his eyes dancing now as he pulled me from the wall and into the room proper. "I think you are. Take off your clothes. *Now*." It

wasn’t like when Cian had said it. Not gradual and not just my shorts.

When I hesitated, Akiva pulled me to him, hand on my throat, but paused when I gasped.

“Color?” He asked.

“Green,” I breathed.

The lich’s grin returned and his grip on my throat tightened. “The more you play, the less likely you’re going to cum tonight,” he promised in a low growl.

I didn’t like that threat. As he held onto my throat lightly, I stripped out of my shorts and kicked them to the floor.

“*Everything*.”

Apparently *he* had no appreciation for my continued dedication to theme. I added my panties to the pile, and he let go of my throat so I could take off both my t-shirt and bra.

I expected him to touch me, like last time. Instead, his eyes flicked over me as he circled me completely. He stared at me, the look too focused for my liking and I hesitantly raised an arm as if to cover myself.

He caught my wrist, gripping it hard, and wouldn’t let me continue. “You aren’t uncomfortable, are you?” Akiva held both my arms loosely behind me, forcing my shoulders back.

It *was* uncomfortable. Cian and Indra were still fully clothed, as was Akiva. I felt out of place. I felt *vulnerable.* After he’d held me there for a few long moments, he’d led me to the couch, urging me to my knees on the sofa to his left.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” he said conversationally, running his fingers through my hair. “But Cian and Indra are putting on quite a show. *I*’m going to watch. You can too, I suppose.”

Sure enough, Indra was on Cian’s lap on Akiva’s other side, straddling his thighs and rocking his newly-naked hips into the vampire’s hand. When had he taken his clothes off? Cian purred encouragements into his boyfriend’s ear, his own clothes still on, though I saw that his jeans were unbuttoned.

Then Akiva’s hand was in my hair and he forced me to look at him. Grinning, he unzipped his jeans, raising his brows expectantly. “Thought you weren’t *selfish*,” he sneered.

I could take a hint.

At his gentle urging, I laid on my stomach, my arms braced over his thighs as I pulled him free from his boxers and ran my tongue up the side of his cock. He was already hard, and I curled my fingers against him as I repeated the motion, then glanced up as I heard a long, low moan from Indra.

“Don’t stop, little witch,” he told me, his gaze flicking to Cian and Indra once more.

My eyes narrowed and I curled my fingers around him gently, still watching his face as best I could as I licked at his length.

Cian and Indra *certainly* had very little interest in us. The vampire was feeding from the hellhound, lips buried in Indra’s throat as he used his hand to tease him.

Akiva’s fingers trailed down my spine, soft encouragements dripping from his lips as he traced patterns over my skin. He didn’t stop, and finally his fingertips found the swell of my ass and the curve of my hip. He kept his hand there for a bit, frustrating me by shifting his hand to let cool air tease over my slit as I brushed my lips over the tip of him.

“You can do better.” His voice was goading, and his other hand curled in my hair as if to give me a hint.

I adjusted my grip on his shaft and licked at his tip again before taking him in my mouth, eyes closing even as Indra groaned loudly once more, the sound chased by Cian’s approving purr.

Akiva stroked lightly over my slit and I gasped, hips arching off the sofa. He pulled away immediately.

I glared at him, unsurprised to see his very arrogant and amused grin. He raised his brows, as if unsure why I was looking at him, and guided my head back down.

As soon as I took him in my mouth again, his fingers came back to tease me, dodging my clit completely and once in a while running along my inner thighs. Seemingly at random he would run his finger along my entrance, occasionally acting like he was going to dip his fingers into me, only to immediately pull away like that had never been his intention at all.

Then, very suddenly, Indra’s face appeared in my line of sight. Cian had all but *thrown* him face down onto the sofa and by extension Akiva’s lap. The lich purred, reaching out to cup his jaw affectionately.

“Don’t let George suffer alone,” Cian teased, hand pressed in between Indra’s shoulder blades as if to keep him where he was. He was on his

knees behind the hellhound, knees pressed into the sofa cushion and had at some point lost his clothes.

Just *looking* at the three of them without their clothes was enough to make me wet.

Akiva was the only one still dressed, though I was going to change that soon.

Indra's hand snagged my jaw and he pulled me off of Akiva to kiss me, tongue in my mouth as I leaned forward to meet him.

He groaned against my lips, body pushed forward when Cian pressed into him. I could *feel* his pleased shudder, and a second later Akiva's fingers were between my thighs.

This time he didn't tease. He pressed one finger into me, eliciting a whine from me that Indra swallowed eagerly.

Suddenly Cian had pulled Indra away from me, urging him towards Akiva's neglected length.

Indra didn't seem to mind at all. He eagerly swallowed Akiva down to the hilt, making the lich cry out.

I took that moment to push Akiva's shirt up, happy that he helped me and that it was on the floor a second later so that I could kiss and *bite* at his collarbone.

"Careful with your *teeth* unless you want to feel all of *ours*," the lich threatened, clicking his own human teeth near my face.

I smirked.

It was apparently the wrong thing to do, because he tilted his head to the side and pulled his fingers back, tracing along my slit again.

"Akiva!" I protested, trying to roll my hips back into his hand.

He shoved my head down playfully, and I refocused my attention to where Indra was very enthusiastically bobbing his head up and down over Akiva's shaft. When Indra pulled off of him I pressed forward, taking him in my hand and into my mouth. I could taste Indra's mouth there, and looked up to meet the hellhound's eyes as I repeated his motion, taking as much of Akiva into my mouth as I could.

The hellhound's lips parted and I saw his fangs, very evident in his aroused state.

My mouth curled into a grin and Indra growled.

"I think *someone* is a bit possessive tonight," Cian commented, gripping Indra's hips harder. "Don't start a puppy fight now, George."

Teasingly, I licked up the side of Akiva's shaft, then swallowed him back down.

Indra licked his lips and pressed forward once more, kissing me hard when I pulled away from Akiva. I gasped in surprise when I felt the lich's fingers enter me, and he took that moment to push my head downward again.

I let him, my lips stretched over his cock as he rocked upward into my mouth. Indra growled and turned to nip at Akiva's hips and inner thighs as the lich's breath hitched.

He warned me, voice breathy, of his impending release, but I didn't pull away. I swallowed around him, nose pressed almost to his pelvis as he rocked his hips upward into my mouth again.

Finally he *did* pull me away, and I lifted my face *just* to have Indra claim my mouth, tongue tasting every part of my tongue and teeth to taste Akiva there.

Cian was still behind him, hands rubbing Indra's hips, though I hadn't seen Indra find his own release.

"Maybe you aren't so *selfish*," Akiva teased as Indra continued to explore my mouth. "But I don't think Indra is convinced, do you Cian?"

"Not at all," the vampire agreed. "You won't let him go without, will you?"

I didn't get to answer. Indra got to his knees on the floor and pulled me down as well, but when I tried to press myself against him he suddenly put a hand to the middle of my back, and shoved me to the carpet face first before pulling my hips around towards him.

"*Indra*-" he grabbed my hips, yanking them upward as he entered me suddenly. My body shuddered and I gasped in excitement.

It was *tight* and *hot* and felt amazing. Indra was the smallest of the three, but was by no means *small.* I started to raise myself to all fours but then Indra was there, using his weight to pin my chest to the floor.

"You're so hot like this," he growled, pulling his hips back to thrust hard into me and making me cry out. "Do you know how much I've wanted to do this?"

"You could've," I laughed, wishing I could reach back and touch myself. He thrust into me again and I yelped. "*Any*time."

"Anytime?" He repeated in my ear. "I can just come over to your house and claim you like this? With you under me while I fuck you?" I whined

and he growled approvingly, one hand wrapping around my hips so he could rub my clit.

“Don’t you *dare* cum,” he breathed in my ear, voice much too sweet for the words.

“*Indra*-“ I argued, but he cut me off with a growl.

“Not until I have. All right, George?” I nodded my head eagerly and his teeth bit into my shoulder lightly until I yelped again, tail writhing between us.

“Put your hands above your head.” He guided my hands out onto the carpet in front of me, crossed. Then the hellhound growled his encouragement. “Don’t move,” he breathed against my neck, changing so that he could grip my hips in his strong fingers.

He fucked me in earnest, hips slamming into mine as he thrust into me over and over. I very quickly lost control of my voice, though thankfully the carpet muffled quite a bit of the sounds falling from my lips.

There was *no* way I wasn’t going to cum. He felt so good inside me, and I was already so worked up.

As if sensing my thoughts, Indra gripped my hair suddenly, pulling me up to my knees and flush against him so he could wrap one arm around my stomach and used the other to force my head back to his shoulder.

“Don’t you *dare*,” he whispered. “I know you can do this for me.” He whispered nonsensically in my ear as his thrusting sped up, making me cry out and try to pull away every time he brushed that sensitive bunch of nerves inside me that pushed me closer and closer to my own orgasm.

Then he shuddered, snarling against my ear as he came inside me while holding me tightly to him.

“Such a good girl,” he breathed, arms wrapped around me and pinning mine to my sides.

“*Indra*-“ I was nearly crying with how much I wanted to cum. Didn’t he *see* that?

He stood, bringing me to my feet as well, and then dropped me on Cian’s lap, my back pressed to the vampire’s chest.

Cian’s arms trapped my arms behind me immediately and he moved his legs so that my knees were hooked over his. He forced my legs wide and when I turned away from him I found Akiva and Indra *both* on the floor in front of us, momentarily wrapped up in each other.

His free hand found my breasts and he ran his thumb over one nipple, twisting and teasing and making me bite my lip.

“You were so good,” Cian purred. “You didn’t cum. You’re such a good girl.” His praise made my stomach curl obscenely and I whimpered.

Akiva turned with his own grin, eyes wicked. “You *absolutely* deserve a reward,” he agreed, crawling forward to sit between my thighs. He leaned forward, kissing me below my navel and working his mouth downward as Cian pushed my legs wider.

He didn’t tease me this time. Instead, three fingers pressed into me and I squirmed, so very aroused by the fact that Cian had me *trapped* and Akiva could do whatever he wanted.

The lich curled his fingers forward, thrusting them in and out as he watched my face while I came apart. I was aware that I was *begging* him to let me finish, and when his thumb found my clit I came almost immediately.

But he didn’t stop. I cried my release into Cian’s mouth, the vampire eagerly kissing me through my orgasm as Akiva *kept going*. I tried to squirm away, and finally Akiva’s thumb on my clit gentled, though he still didn’t stop.

“Akiva-“ I tried to turn to him, but Cian kept me from doing so by recapturing my mouth. Indra had sat on the sofa as well, and his mouth found my nipple.

I was sure I couldn’t take any more of this, but I found myself rocking into Akiva’s hand again, and he took that as encouragement to *keep going*.

His thumb pressed down more insistently, rubbing sporadically so that I couldn’t anticipate his movements. It set me further on edge and I moaned into Cian’s mouth, finally falling limply back against him. He grinned into my mouth and Akiva leaned down to *bite* my thigh, inexplicably throwing me into another orgasm.

This time I really *did* cry. Tears ran down my face as I keened into Cian’s jaw, Indra’s lips on my neck while Cian whispered praise in my ear.

Thankfully Akiva’s hand was gone a moment later, and the Lich sat up so he could drape himself over me and kiss my stomach. A sheen of sweat covered my body and my thighs trembled.

“I’m glad you came to New Orleans,” the lich said conversationally as I panted against Cian’s shoulder.

I glared at him, tear tracks still wet on my face, and he did not have the decency to look apologetic.

“Have we convinced you to stay yet?” Indra pressed, licking over the bite marks that reddened my shoulder from his teeth.

I was suddenly very tired; my body exhausted from our activities.

Hiding a smile against Cian’s throat, I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I mused, sitting across his lap more comfortably as his hand ran up my back and Akiva came to sit on the sofa and pull my legs into his lap.

“Maybe you should try to convince me again.”

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*To Be Continued in **Bury Their Bones,** book 2 of the Wicked Fortunes series.*
Think George had it rough with a wendigo and some vampires? Wait until the loa request a visit.

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THANK YOU FOR READING

Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed *A Little Wicked*, please take a moment to leave a review!

I'd also like to say thank you to everyone who helped me through this. Gretchen, thank you so much for fielding my random messages and calls and keeping me on track. Stormy, you're the best editor ever. Thanks for putting up with me, my weird relationship with grammar, and my strange love for the word 'deigned.'

And last, but certainly not least, to my mother. Without your support, I wouldn't be able to do any of this. You're amazing, and I'm so proud to be your daughter.

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